

## **Office Haunting: What employees fear most are scary conversations with their boss**

*Research shows one in ten people aren't confident in their ability to hold crucial conversations at work*

September 29, 2009 – Provo, UT – Across the U.S., employees are haunted by something scary and destructive—and it's not ghosts and goblins. New research shows, more than 70 percent of people run in fear from a scary conversation with their boss, coworker or direct report.

"Scary conversations are crucial conversations," says Joseph Grenny coauthor of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Crucial Conversations*. "In these moments, most people run the other way because experience tells them the other person will be angry or defensive."

A poll conducted by Grenny and his coauthors found that the number one person employees fear holding a scary conversation with is their boss. For example, one respondent had to tell her boss that his daughter was not qualified to be hired for an open position. And the most common topic of these scary conversations is bad behavior. Respondents shared examples of the four scariest conversations at work:

1. **Bad behavior:** "I had to tell my manager that my supervisor was a terrible leader and doing long-term damage to the company."
2. **Obnoxious behavior:** "My coworker was meddling in my life and criticizing my children. She actually said my daughter looked like a hooker."
3. **Illegal activity:** "An executive accused me of changing a document after he had signed it."
4. **Performance reviews:** "I had to explain to my direct report that his intentions/actions were not being well received by staff, and that it would hurt his credibility to continue on that path."

People are so leery of these conversations that they literally run the other way in fear.

According to the poll of more than 970 people, 34 percent put off holding a scary conversation for at least a month while nearly one in four have put off the conversation for more than a year. Common escape methods include avoiding the person, dancing around the topic, and even quitting their job. One respondent hurried into the women's bathroom to avoid the person with whom she needed to hold a scary conversation—to her surprise, he followed her in there!

What's more, these conversations aren't only scary, they're also destructive. According to the poll, people who are less than "fairly confident" in their ability to succeed in a scary conversation are 59 percent more likely to live with poor productivity, 96 percent more likely to live with poor morale, and 86 percent more likely to live with a poor work environment.

Grenny says the skills to speak up to anyone about anything aren't just nice to have, they're necessary to have in order to be successful.

"With the right set of skills, these conversations don't have to be scary," says Grenny. "Our research shows the select few who know how to speak up candidly and respectfully—no matter the topic—are viewed as the top performers in their organization."

Grenny offers six tips for approaching and conquering scary conversations about bad behavior:

- **Talk face-to-face and in private.** Don't chicken out by reverting to e-mail or phone.
- **Assume the best of others.** Perhaps he or she is unaware of what they're doing. Enter the conversation as a curious friend rather than an angry co-worker.
- **Use tentative language.** Begin to describe the problem by saying, "I'm not sure you're intending this . . ." or "I'm not even sure you're aware. . ."
- **Share facts not conclusions.** Not only are conclusions possibly wrong, but they also create defensiveness. Say, "In the last two meetings you laughed at my suggestion. I expect people to disagree, but laughing?"
- **Ask for their view.** Next, ask if they see the problem differently. You're now poised to have a healthy conversation about bad behavior.
- **Use equal treatment.** These skills apply to bosses and co-workers alike. Everyone should be treated like a reasonable, rational person who deserves your respect.

**About [VitalSmarts](#):** An innovator in corporate training and organizational performance, VitalSmarts is home to award-winning training products that deliver powerful tools for enriching relationships and improving results. The company also has three *New York Times* bestselling books, [Crucial Conversations](#), [Crucial Confrontations](#), and [Influencer](#). VitalSmarts has been listed twice on the *Inc.* 500 list of fastest-growing companies and has taught more than 2 million people worldwide. [www.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)

**Note to editor:** Joseph Grenny, coauthor of, [Crucial Conversations](#), is available for interview. Copies of the book are available upon request.

**About the research:** The study collected responses via an online survey tool from 970 individuals. Margin of error is approximately 3%. Full survey results are available here: <http://www.vital-smarts.com/userfiles/File/Research/ScaryConversations.doc>.

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