

## **Long-distance loathing: Telecommuting damages morale and productivity**

*New research shows working remotely causes 243 percent more problems*

June 17, 2009 – Provo, UT – New research shows that 13 out of 14 common workplace relationship problems occur far more frequently within “virtual teams” (teams with members scattered across various geographies) than within teams located in the same building.

According to the new study conducted by VitalSmarts and the authors of the *New York Times* bestseller *Crucial Conversations* (McGraw-Hill), distance in the workplace does more harm than good. The online survey of more than 500 people found that problems with remote colleagues are significantly more difficult to solve and last longer than with on-site colleagues. What’s worse, the most common means of coping with the effects of distance are not only destructive to working relationships, they are also destructive to overall productivity.

According to the survey, when people face challenges with a colleague who works in a different location, they either resort to silence or other passive coping strategies, or they become “verbally violent” or attacking toward their colleague.

When resorting to silence, common strategies include screening phone calls from remote colleagues, not returning their calls and e-mails, leaving them out of the loop on important decisions, or avoiding working with them all together.

Common “violence” strategies include dissuading others from working with remote colleagues, criticizing them, gossiping or complaining to others, and vengefully challenging the colleagues’ decisions.

Joseph Grenny, bestselling author of *Crucial Conversations* and co-author of the study, says that while CEOs have done a good job calculating the savings and efficiencies of virtual teaming, they haven’t yet accounted for the unintended costs.

“The solution isn’t co-location—it’s communication.” says Grenny. “Unless leaders of virtual teams invest in the skills required to make these teams work, they’ll continue to significantly undercut their potential. *The most crucial skill is the ability to raise emotionally and politically risky issues with virtual teammates in a candid but respectful way.* Most every problem we identified in our study flowed directly from failure to hold these types of crucial conversations.”

Grenny offers five tips for holding crucial conversations with remote colleagues:

- 1. Talk *before* problems start.** Invest significant time up front talking about how you’ll work together and establishing ground rules for airing future concerns.
- 2. Praise early wins.** Take time early on to acknowledge small successes. Go the extra mile to praise people publicly in a conference call or write a personal e-mail and cc their boss.
- 3. Never raise individual concerns publicly.** The problem with long-distance crucial conversations is that you’re *visually impaired* (you can’t read body language) and the other person is *hearing impaired* (they easily hear villainy in your complaints). When bringing up concerns with a colleague, always do so one-to-one.

4. **Start by clarifying what you DON'T want to say.** Always begin the long-distance crucial conversation by pointing out any possible misinterpretations of what you want to discuss. For example, *"I'd like to talk about our mutual schedule commitments, but I'm worried you'll hear me as suggesting that the problem lies entirely in Japan. I know it doesn't. I know Grand Rapids is also contributing to the problem and I'd like to figure out how to solve problems on both our ends."*
5. **Gain allies before raising problems with a group.** At times, you may need to raise a crucial issue on a conference call. If so, always vet your concerns with remote teammates one-to-one beforehand. Then ask for their help when you raise the issue—not by taking your "side" but by candidly raising their opinions so the dialogue can be productive.

**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 end 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 also available upon request.

**About the research:** The study collected responses via an online survey tool from more than 500 individuals. Margin of error is approximately 3%. Full survey results are available upon request.

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