

Silent Danger: The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Safety

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Q: Why did VitalSmarts conduct this research?

A: VitalSmarts has successfully uncovered cultural and organizational barriers that lead to chronic problems across various industries. Previous studies include uncovering causes behind our nation's high rate of medical errors in the healthcare industry as well as the high rate of project failure in the corporate sector. In both studies, VitalSmarts found that cultures of silence are a primary contributing factor behind organizational failure to achieve desired outcomes, save lives, and reach revenue targets.

VitalSmarts' goal in the *Silent Danger* research was to uncover why more than four million people are injured on the job each year costing organizations \$48.6 billion annually.

VitalSmarts findings indicate that unless and until cultures of silence are absolved in safety-conscious organizations, companies will continue to suffer completely avoidable losses in both health and performance. VitalSmarts message to leaders is that the next leap forward in workplace safety will come not just from changes to processes, technology, or policies, but from changes to behavior—specifically in people's willingness and ability to speak up and address avoidable workplace accidents.

And while safety improvement is reason enough to conduct this research, the potential benefits go far beyond ensuring human health. The study shows that investing in people's capacity to speak up and confront workplace incidents can likewise lead to improved accountability for quality, productivity, cost control, HR policies, and any other area of performance.

Q: What are the key findings?

A: *Silent Danger* shows the tragic secret behind most workplace injuries is that someone is aware of the threat well in advance, but is either unwilling or unable to speak up.

There are five workplace threats that are especially likely to persist as “undiscussables” in safety-conscious organizations throughout the U.S. Specifically, 93 percent of employees say their workgroup is currently at risk from one or more of these five undiscussables. And, nearly half are aware of an injury or death caused by these threats. The most troubling finding is that when employees see one of these five threats, only one in four speak up despite the potential likelihood for injury.

Q: What are the five “crucial conversations”?

A: The five crucial conversations identified by the study are the most prevalent and most costly barriers to workplace safety. Each conversation fits three quantitative conditions: they are common, they are costly, and they have become “undiscussable.”

1. **Get It Done.** Unsafe practices that are justified by tight deadlines.
2. **Undiscussable Incompetence.** Unsafe practices that stem from skill deficits that can't be discussed.
3. **Just this Once.** Unsafe practices that are justified as exceptions to the rule.
4. **This Is Overboard.** Unsafe practices that bypass precautions considered excessive.
5. **Are You a Team Player?** Unsafe practices that are justified for the good of the team, company, or customer.

Q: What are the barriers to these five “crucial conversations”? And how do you overcome them?

A: *Silent Danger* reveals the missing ingredient in a safety culture is candor. When accountability is carefully and intentionally built into the culture, every employee is responsible for holding his or her peers accountable. In these cultures, the unsafe actions of errant individuals almost never persist. Consequently, the crucial ingredient to a safety culture is ensuring a critical mass of people are willing and able to speak up when safety lines are crossed—irrespective of who crosses them.

Q: What was the design and methodology for the study? How did you gather the data?

A: *Silent Danger* studied more than 1,600 frontline workers, managers, and safety directors across 30 companies during the first half of 2009. Researchers began with on-site interviews and focus groups with 130 people from eight different companies to find and analyze patterns of poor communication that threatened workplace safety. Researchers then verified these patterns through a survey administered to 1,500 employees from 22 different organizations to test whether and how breakdowns in communication were confronted and the impacts these breakdowns had on workplace safety.

Q: What are VitalSmarts’ recommendations for companies who want to improve?

A: Senior leaders in safety-conscious organizations can predict and prevent avoidable accidents by creating a culture where the five conversations are held quickly and well. Senior leaders should:

1. **Establish a baseline and a target for improvement.** The fundamental principle of organizational attention is that if you don't measure it, you don't care about it. Survey your organization to establish a baseline measure of the five accidents waiting to happen and set a clear target for improvement. Access an organizational assessment at www.vital-smarts.com/safety.
2. **Teach your employees world-class skills.** A handful of people already speak up and prevent accidents from occurring. Training people in high-leverage skill sets geared to holding crucial conversations and crucial confrontations can be a powerful way to help others speak up and effectively address the five undiscussables.
3. **Target six sources of influence.** Guarantee the success of your training initiative by identifying the few vital behaviors that, if changed, will lead to the safety results you desire. Then, ensure these behaviors are adopted by targeting six sources of influence that both motivate and enable your employees to change. Find out more at www.vital-smarts.com/influencerreport.

