Chapter 3

How to Assess and Guide Taboo Talk

SHRM research indicates that an overwhelming majority of employees (95 percent of those surveyed!) have been involved in contentious workplace conversations—as participants, bystanders, or managers called in to handle the disruption.

Honestly, who *hasn't* engaged in taboo talk? Why do people who ought to know better discuss polarizing issues, sometimes even going out of their way to do so? And on the job, no less, where contentious conversations can strangle collaboration and productivity?

Polarizing topics are alluring for two main reasons: talking about them elicits emotion and introduces unpredictability to human encounters. These are not negative experiences for many people. The desire to feel or express strong emotion and join in unpredictable interactions, even vicariously, accounts for the deep popularity of such things as gossip tabloids that pass along outrageous rumors and shock jocks and pundits who shout from radio programs and podcasts.

But what about taboo talk at work? How can those responsible for making sure their organizations run smoothly address the disruptions created by these conversations? Polarizing discussions on the job clearly pose problems, both immediate and over the long term, with consequences both obvious and still unseen. Taboo talk is widespread and seemingly inevitable.

It's time to call in the HR bomb squad to deal with this intermittently exploding workplace powder keg.

SHRM, the world's largest society of HR professionals, did in fact respond to the turbulent conversations taking place nationwide in 2020, and its responses are ongoing. The lessons learned from its efforts led to the practical strategies offered in this chapter for handling workplace polarization more effectively. These new tools help managers by assessing and guiding taboo talk instead of ignoring or suppressing it.

ASSESSING EMPATHY

As the world continues to grapple with COVID-19, social injustice, political turmoil, and economic uncertainty, employers continue to encounter the forces of polarization. In 2020, as more and more contentious issues came to the forefront, few organizations were ready for the volume and vehemence of the workplace conversations taking place among their employees, customers, and other stakeholders. In response to burgeoning unrest around the United States that summer, SHRM established a Blue Ribbon Commission on Racial Equity as a call to action for the business community to address racial inequity in the workplace.[1]

The commission's members include executives, HR professionals, researchers, and academics committed to developing safe, civil, and positive organizational cultures. They have determined that promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) is impossible without a strong focus on empathy.[2]

Empathy is more than a soft skill that is simply nice to have—it is an essential business skill. All of us, from entry-level employees

---

[1] Society for Human Research Management, "SHRM Announces Blue Ribbon Commission on Racial Equity," press release, August 5, 2020, https://www. shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/shrm-announces-blue-ribbon-commission-on-racial-equity-.aspx.

[2] Society for Human Research Management, *SHRM's Blue Ribbon Commission Report on Racial Equity*, 2021, https://pages.shrm.org/brcreport?_ga=2.249223490.437339477.1631823373-1361937067.1466991061.

to C-suite executives, must learn to put ourselves in others' shoes, purposefully seeking to understand and learn from many people's unique perspectives.

One of the commission's projects in 2021 contributed to making the business case for empathy. SHRM conducted a survey of US workers for their views on empathy in the workplace,[3] which yielded real numbers to support putting idea into practice.

Nearly 2,500 people participated in the survey. They were asked to rate both their organizations and coworkers on various aspects of empathy. A large majority of participants—78 percent—said that empathetic employees were viewed as better overall performers. Those who gave high empathy scores to their employers were twice as likely to consider their organizations financially sound and almost four times more likely to recommend them to potential job seekers as good places to work (compared with organizations given low empathy scores). Meanwhile, employees in low-empathy organizations were twice as likely than those in empathetic organizations to be actively searching for new jobs.

THE EMPATHY INDEX AND RACIAL INEQUITY

The responses to this survey strongly point to a need for organizations to better gauge the nature and level of empathy in their cultures—not just because it is the right thing to do but also to improve employee performance and reduce costly turnover. Empathetic workplaces enhance productivity, engagement, and inclusion.

What constitutes an empathetic workplace? The survey findings led SHRM to develop a new tool, the Empathy Index, to help organizations determine that for themselves. This metric is designed to

---

[3] Society for Human Research Management, *Empathy: DE&I's Missing Piece: Empathetic Workplaces Enhance Productivity, Employee Engagement and Inclusion*, 2021, https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Documents/TFAW21_EmpathyReport.pdf.

assess the overall level of empathy in an organization's culture by focusing on five core DE&I-related behaviors. The higher an organization scores on the Empathy Index, the more committed it is to combating racial inequity.

A user of the Empathy Index provides a rating for each of the following statements: *belonging* ("My organization provides a sense of belonging to all staff."), *inclusion* ("My organization demands inclusion."), *openness* ("My organization fosters openness to different perspectives."), *conflict management* ("My organization resolves conflict rather than buries it."), and *nondiscriminatory practices* ("My organization does not make decisions based upon a person's identity.").

THE EMPATHY/POLARIZATION INDEX

The Empathy Index was created to focus on racial issues and discrimination, but it is capable of a broader reach. It can be extended to address polarizing issues of all kinds—race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, politics, sex, gender, age, physical and mental health, disability, and more. After all, contentious conversation on any taboo topic can be an organizational culture killer.

Empathetic workplaces foster *productive* rather than *destructive* discussions—on any topic. Empathetic listeners prepare to engage their counterparts by understanding their perspectives rather than judging them. Otherwise-polarizing discussions, when handled correctly in an environment that values empathy, can bring people closer together, not drive them further apart.

I have adapted the Empathy Index by deploying the modern definition of polarization offered in Chapter 2: the adoption of opposing perspectives with the potential for weaponized entrenchment.

This new tool, the Empathy/Polarization Index (Em/Pol, for short), is designed to help managers deal with taboo talk. Users of this index will provide ratings for these five statements:

» *Belonging*—My organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging.

» *Openness*—My organization fosters openness to different perspectives.

» *Conflict Management*—My organization resolves conflict rather than buries it.

» *Polarization*—My organization welcomes individual as well as collective opinions of all kinds and works to prevent people from becoming further polarized from one another.

» *Entrenchment*—My organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions (even if polarizing) from becoming entrenched and weaponized.

The first three factors of the Em/Pol Index mirror those in the Empathy Index. Two new factors make this metric applicable to any polarizing issues that might come up in a taboo talk. The Empathy Index factors *inclusion* and *nondiscriminatory practices* are behaviors specific to issues of racial inequity; the Em/Pol Index factors *polarization* and *entrenchment* (which can lead to weaponization) are broader and thus subsume them. The resulting adapted metric is more useful in more circumstances in more workplaces.

Organizations with a high score on the Em/Pol Index exhibit less conflict and better outcomes from discussions that occur in those workplaces.

We recommend that employers use this innovative tool to conduct a formal assessment of empathy and polarization in their organizational cultures at least one a year. Related anecdotal information should be captured throughout the year. Together, this qualitative and quantitative data will inform an organization's readiness for effectively dealing with difficult conversations.

COMPARISONS, CONTRASTS, COMMUNALITIES

Once an organization is aware of its levels of empathy and polarization based on its score on the Em/Pol Index, it can make concerted efforts to become a more empathetic and less polarized workplace. Increasing empathy and reducing polarization can prevent people's opinions from becoming entrenched and potentially being used as verbal and social weapons inside and outside the organization.

These efforts start with building bridges between "me" and "we"—that is, encouraging mutual appreciation of what *one* person experiences and what *all* people experience. In psychology, this is known as drawing relational communalities.[4] Communality is defined in the vernacular as a feeling of group solidarity.[5] Numerous academic models and theories developed over the years attempt to describe and analyze interpersonal relationships. For industrial-organizational psychologists (who study the workplace), relational communality refers to interactions that leverage comparisons and contrasts to find common experiences, with the aim of broadening understanding about others.

Taboo talk is certainly ripe for leveraging comparisons and contrasts because it tends to draw out strong differences in opinion very quickly. Such discussions can therefore serve as vehicles for finding relational communality and broader understanding among people at work and at home.

Here's an example from everyday life. A newly engaged couple visits the parents of one of the future spouses for the first time. They'll all be attending a sporting event together. The soon-to-be in-laws announce their support for Team A. The young visitor, a rabid,

---

[4] Cathy Goodwin, "Communality as a Dimension of Service Relationships," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 5, no. 4 (1996): 387–415, https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15327663jcp0504_04; Kristin D. Mickelson, Renee F. Lyons, Michael J. L. Sullivan, and James C. Coyne, "Yours, Mine, Ours: The Relational Context of Communal Coping," in *Personal Relationships: Implications for Clinical and Community Psychology*, ed. Barbara R. Sarason and Steve Duck (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2001), 181–200.

[5] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "communality (*n.*)," accessed September 21, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communality.

diehard fan of Team B, who *hates* Team A and its supporters with a passion, is aghast. The topic has become taboo! Is it a deal breaker? Is the wedding off? Will team loyalty override family loyalty?

No. The future spouse pauses to assess the future in-laws' views with empathy, in deference to love and passion for their partner.

The Team B devotee, while still shocked, nonetheless continues the conversation with the fans of Team A, endeavoring to explore their views on other subjects, thereby seeking communalities in their relational thinking. This impending marriage is saved!

Granted, this is an overly simplistic picture of relational communality, but it is an easy way to visualize our encounters with taboo topics and how we manage (or mismanage) them.

Here's an example from the workplace, where relational communality takes a different form. Two new hires engage in small talk and ask each other about their hometowns. The answers are factual and neutral, but the questioners may be harboring hidden biases against people who come from those places. Over time, as the coworkers talk and interact, they discover more about each other, continually testing their communalities consciously and subconsciously. Soon they're discussing current events. Next they're discussing *controversial* current events—the first step toward taboo talk!

Up until now these colleagues' conversational relationship was calm and cordial. Now they're tackling tough, difficult issues. Will their next conversations lead to conflict as they dig in to argue their respective sides? Will they become increasingly hostile, revealing a lack of empathy for the other's views, turning their entrenched views into words that act as weapons?

If these coworkers are able to test their relational communalities in a structured environment, with guidance in comparing and contrasting their opinions on all kinds of topics, they will indeed be able to engage in productive discussions—taboo as well as uncontroversial—just as they have been doing all along.

Structure and guidance are needed to achieve this state of conversational equilibrium in the workplace.

A FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

To help mitigate the risk of people's opinions becoming entrenched and weaponized in the workplace, allow me to introduce another new tool: the Me + We + WO + RK framework. When people express strong opinions on polarizing topics during a contentious conversation, their managers can use this tool to script the discussion and structure its environment. This will enable the parties to engage safely and respectfully; their talk won't have room to run rampant and get out of hand. The tool can be applied just as conflict is barely brewing, as well as during or after a full-blown event.

The purpose of the Me + We + WO + RK framework is to guide the parties toward important insights about their difficult conversational experiences, with the goal of improving the atmosphere for the taboo talk that will no doubt happen again.

Applying the framework requires the parties to a conversation to ask themselves four questions, each of which is associated with a pair of letters (a word or an acronym) signifying its context:

» *Me*: What did I experience during this conversation? (Use self-awareness to identify your perceptions of what occurred.)

» *We*: What did my counterpart experience during this conversation? (Use empathy to imagine the other person's perspectives on what occurred.)

» *WO*: What were the work outcomes of this conversation? (Use your powers of observation to recognize the impacts of what occurred on you, your counterpart, and the organization.)

» *RK*: What refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes? (Use your deeper understanding of what occurred—gained from answering the first three questions—to guide and temper future conversations in the workplace.)

The *Me* question encourages each employee to engage in self-reflection. The *We* question encourages them to reflect empathetically on their opponent's thinking. The *WO* question (Work Outcomes) encourages them to consider the effects of their discussion, personally and professionally—that is, how their tough talk affected themselves, their opponent, and the workplace. The *RK* question (Refined Knowledge) encourages them to use their newfound insights to change the way they will engage in taboo talk going forward.

By doing things differently based on the answers to the four questions of the Me + We + WO + RK framework, the parties and the organization can avoid repeating similar problems. Every contentious discussion on a taboo topic can be dissected using this tool. Organizations just need to be willing to put in the "WO + RK."

Part II will show how the Em/Pol Index and the Me + We + WO + RK framework apply in real life, based on brief case studies organized topically in five chapters. Each story includes lessons learned to serve as guideposts when encountering similar situations in the workplace.

The anecdotes were gathered from practicing HR professionals involved in polarizing discussions or their aftermaths. In their complexity, severity, and resolutions, the individual incidents range from trivial to significant. Collectively, they serve as shining examples of what to do and tarnished examples of what *not* to do. Annotating them with our two new tools demonstrates to managers everywhere how to prevent disasters when possible and mitigate negative impacts when unavoidable.