

## Chapter 10

# Epilogue: The Future of Taboo Talk

The data explored in this book shows that workers have a true passion for talking about taboo topics. The data also shows, paradoxically, that such polarizing discussions can make the workplace more inclusive. One of the biggest challenges for any leader is how to manage contentious conversations on difficult issues, especially those unrelated to the job at hand.

The instinctual management response is to quell conflict and refocus people on their work. But what if that is the wrong approach? What if preventing or suppressing taboo talk is less effective than welcoming it? Too often, it seems, leaders seek conflict *resolution* through conflict *avoidance*.

“Avoidance is the best short-term strategy to escape conflict, and the best long-term strategy to ensure suffering.”<sup>1</sup> So advises Brendon Burchard, a business and motivational trainer and author of *The Charge: Activating the 10 Human Drives That Make You Feel Alive*.<sup>2</sup>

The literature on leadership—works by ethnographer Simon Sinek, professor of communications Leslie DeChurch, motivational speaker Tony Robbins, and others—focuses on the importance of building better teams. Most managers are familiar with classic principles of teamwork, such as the forming, storming, norming, and

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<sup>1</sup> Brendon Burchard (@BrendonBurchard), “Avoidance is the best short-term strategy to escape conflict, and the best long-term strategy to ensure suffering,” Twitter, April 8, 2014, <https://twitter.com/brendonburchard/status/453630321624236033?lang=en>.

<sup>2</sup> Brendon Burchard, *The Charge: Activating the 10 Human Drives That Make You Feel Alive* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

performing stages of group development. But we rarely apply these principles to the whole organization—which is, of course, really just a scaled-up team—or to the organization’s culture.

Worse yet, we often *discourage* the application of these team-building leadership principles, even when they would be more productive than other methods used to promote inclusion in the workplace. A couple of examples of this ineffective attitude are shared next.

### INACTION IN ACTION

A supervisor at a think tank dependent on federal funds advised her staff to never discuss political views at work so as not to endanger the organization’s funding opportunities. The mere perception that employees had independent perspectives was risky, she said—even regarding legislation pertinent to their jobs and other not-so-controversial issues.

These discussions, however, would have actually better preserved the organization’s funding. Staff members freely sharing their perspectives with one another would have helped eliminate information silos, build better project teams, identify individual biases, develop more inclusive interactions, and increase productivity. On a cultural level, everyone would have experienced a greater sense of belonging within the organization.

Ironically, staff members’ inability to share information eventually led to a series of management errors that ultimately cut off the organization’s funding completely. This resulted in two hundred layoffs and fewer resources available to those who relied on the think tank’s work product, all because a leader did not know how to handle discussions around what were perceived to be taboo topics.

More recently in my own office, I have witnessed managers struggle with controversial matters. After the January 6, 2021,

insurrection at the US Capitol, many employees demanded a venue to discuss what happened. The catastrophe was local and personally affected some staff members, so I understood people's need to talk about this powerfully relevant yet potentially explosive subject.

One supervisor interrupted a group of anxious employees and told them to stop talking and get back to work. Within minutes, they continued their discussion on a Slack channel—without any structure, guidance, or awareness of how to reach a productive resolution. Their conversations devolved into rage, name calling, and threats. In the aftermath, some people lost their jobs, and others damaged their futures with the organization.

The supervisor who could have turned the event into an opportunity for empathy and inclusion revealed his inability to lead when leadership was needed most.

## DESTIGMATIZING THE UNCONVENTIONAL

When polarizing discussions go wrong, they can ruin lives. When they go right, they can improve individual careers and organizational cultures. The key to talking about taboo topics is to destigmatize them.

This book provides unconventional but fact-based guidance for driving conversations productively about any topic, from the mundane to the taboo. The research and data presented here can equip business leaders with the scientific and practical information we need to build better workplaces and a better world.

People are the most valuable resource in the workplace, and workplace culture is the operating system for people to reach their potential.

While I have always followed conventional wisdom and tried to avoid engaging in controversial conversations, I now intend to seek them out as a creative solution to the empathy deficit. We can halt the further polarization of opinions and opinion holders.

Taming and tempering taboo talk is a hopeful means for promoting empathy and openness, managing conflict, and preventing people's views from becoming entrenched and weaponized against others. We can easily make the effort to be more aware of our own experiences, others' experiences, and the work outcomes of our experiences and to apply the refined knowledge gained from understanding those experiences and outcomes.

You, your people, and your organization depend on it—and are bound to benefit from it.