Chapter 9

Opinions, Empathy, and Culture

The previous chapters demonstrate how willingly and often people exchange views on all manner of subjects and how prone we are to taboo talk in particular. During contentious conversations, people often become *opinionated*—"firmly or unduly adhering to" their opinions.[1] This behavior is an indication of entrenched thinking, which can be used as a weapon to damage others—an especially dangerous state of affairs in the workplace. (Recall the updated definition of *polarization* in Chapter 2: the adoption of opposing perspectives with the potential for weaponized entrenchment.)

Polarization is a symptom as well as a catalyst of taboo talk, fostering divisions that can be fatal to an organization's survival.

Another cause of division is defensiveness, which, according to author and educator Irshad Manji, arises from the fear of being judged. Citing behavioral science research by Otten and Jonas,[2] Manji explains that "when we feel shamed, blamed, or labeled unworthy by those whose respect we covet, we become defensive. The result? More division."[3] Working or learning in a judgmental environment "rarely inspires people to listen to one another

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[1] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "opinionated (*adj.*)," accessed September 26, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/opinionated.

[2] Marte Otten and Kai J. Jonas, "Humiliation as an Intense Emotional Experience: Evidence from the Electro-Encephalogram," *Social Neuroscience* 9, no. 1 (2014): 23–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2013.855660.

[3] Irshad Manji, "Fear Sows Division," Moral Courage ED, accessed September 26, 2021, https://moralcourage-ed.org/about/.

authentically" but instead creates the conditions for "sowing resentment, fueling self-censorship, and undermining collaboration."[4]

In terms of taboo talk in the workplace, someone who is defensive of their views because they feel judged for expressing them is in the same position as someone who is opinionated: their perspectives have become entrenched and thus are more likely to be weaponized.

DIVERSITY WITHOUT DIVISION

So, how *do* individuals and organizations achieve "diversity without division" in a society that is "increasingly diverse and polarized at the same time" and "needs people to engage with empathy"?[5] Can people who work together learn to express differing opinions on polarizing issues without letting their conversations devolve into or exacerbate real conflict on the job?

Manji's solution is to "cultivate diversity of viewpoint" in the organizational culture. "Honest diversity [in an organization] starts with the desire for varied perspectives," she says, because this enables diverse representation to emerge "honestly" or organically from within. Having a mix of views can "build bridges—and teamwork—across institutions." Imposing diverse representation *on* an organization, however, hoping that will inspire diverse thinking ("the other way round") will instead "incite needless friction."[6]

To help institutions embrace diversity of thought, Manji developed a framework to train businesses, schools, and communities in "moral courage." This philosophy and methodology recognizes that "learning to communicate across differences, especially disagreements, is a key *leadership* skill," which is designed as a tool

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[4] Irshad Manji, "White Fragility Is Not the Answer. Honest Diversity Is," *Heterodox: The Blog*, July 7, 2020, https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/viewpoint-diversity-white-fragility-honest-diversity/.

[5] Irshad Manji, "Diversity without Division," Moral Courage ED, accessed September 26, 2021, https://moralcourage-ed.org.

[6] Manji, "White Fragility."

"to transform disagreement into engagement and, ultimately, into shared action."[7]

EMPATHETIC LISTENING

What is it like to work in a nonjudgmental environment where people are encouraged to express their opinions on everything from the mundane to the controversial? In such a culture—for example, at Barry-Wehmiller Companies Inc.—taboo talk isn't considered taboo. It's simply part of what CEO and Chairman Bob Chapman calls "empathetic listening."

Empathetic listening is taught in the company's internal "university" as Communication Skills Training.[8] Prominent business leaders familiar with the course have been so impressed by its positive impact that they have been influenced to challenge others to be similarly "committed to listening a little more and talking a little less."[9]

How Barry-Wehmiller employees communicate with one another is something the company considers within its "span of care." This term is a pointed contrast to "span of control," a concept in business and HR that describes the number of subordinates a supervisor is responsible for.[10] Chapman's coinage reflects a different understanding and style of management, which can be described as "organizational leadership reconnecting with their own humanity and recognizing the humanity of those they lead. Recognizing that the people within their span of care are not numbers on a spread-

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[7] Moral Courage Project, *Moral Courage College Teaches "Honest Diversity,"* accessed September 30, 2021, https://moralcourage.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Document-for-mc.com_learn.pdf.

[8] Bob Chapman, "Inspiring a Listening Revolution," *Barry-Wehmiller* (blog), January 21, 2015, https://www.barrywehmiller.com/post/blog/2020/03/05/inspiring-a-listening-revolution.

[9] William Ury, "The Power of Listening," filmed January 2015 in San Diego, CA. YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saXfavo1OQo.

[10] Bob Chapman and Raj Sisoda, *Everybody Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People Like Family* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015).

sheet"[11] and instead acknowledging that "the way we lead impacts the way people live. And, that extends to the health and wellbeing of those within our span of care."[12]

Listening and caring: Can this be a successful strategy for managing conflict and avoiding disruption in the workplace? To answer that, I'll recount one more real-life story like those collected in Part II.

CULTURE OVER OPINION

A machinist in a factory was a known contrarian who wasn't afraid to regularly and zealously share his political views with his coworkers on the shop floor. He had been around for nearly three decades and was a vital cog in the enterprise, but he was now destroying the culture with his problematic opinions and disruptive demeanor.

The CEO decided to see for himself what was going on. During their first encounter, however, the otherwise talkative machinist would say nothing to him. For years, the CEO attempted to engage, but the man remained silent in his presence. It wasn't until the financial crisis of 2008 that the machinist finally unloaded his opinions on the CEO at an event in front of the whole company.

As expected, the CEO practiced empathetic listening, and the two finally talked. Then the CEO did the unexpected. He encouraged the machinist to *continue* having these kinds of conversations—not because he agreed with the man's opinions but because he saw in the man a kernel of untapped leadership potential.

This turned out to be the most valuable thing to come out of the pair's long-awaited exchange. Until that moment, the machinist's

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[11]Bob Chapman, "Let's Start a Human Revolution in Business," LinkedIn, November 7, 2018, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/lets-start-human-revolution-business-bob-chapman/.

[12]Bob Chapman, "Wellness and Work: What's the ROI of Caring?" LinkedIn, November 8, 2017, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/whats-roi-caring-bob-chapman/.

coworkers had *heard* him but never *listened* to him. Once the CEO gave the machinist the encouragement to speak his mind and a megaphone to project his voice, he was no longer feared, and the disruptions he had caused ended.

Lessons Learned

What the CEO really did was show the machinist that the company's culture was one in which differences of opinion could thrive. He also showed the entire workforce that the organization was committed to maintaining its cultural norms, of which listening to diverse viewpoints was one. In other words, the CEO demonstrated that no topics of discussion, including the machinist's problematic political pronouncements, could shred the culture's guiding principles.

A challenge to the organizational culture (here in the form of a contrarian sharing divisive opinions) presented an opportunity for the company to recommit to its principles (in this case, empathetic listening) instead of succumbing to potential division provoked by the challenge. Honest communication—even what was considered taboo—was celebrated rather than dismissed or discouraged.

Fostering allegiance to organizational culture over individual opinion is a novel approach to cultural alignment.

Empathy/Polarization Index

Openness (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives) and *polarization* (the organization welcomes individual as well as collective opinions of all kinds and works to prevent people from becoming further polarized from one another) are the two key factors involved in the development of this story. *Belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging) is prominent in its resolution.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

From the perspective of the CEO, the *We* question (what did my counterpart experience during this conversation?) is most applicable

here: he used empathy to imagine the machinist's perspectives. This prompted the machinist into self-awareness (the *Me* question: what did I experience during this conversation?) and likely into some empathetic awareness of his coworkers as well.

PRACTICAL STEPS

Honest diversity and moral courage. Empathetic listening and truly human leadership. The Empathy/Polarization Index and the Me + We + WO + RK framework (see Chapter 3). All of these concepts address, at least in part, polarization and polarizing discussions in the workplace.

We have seen how conversations about taboo topics set off sparks and explored the science of why that happens. A collection of real-life incidents showed us some of the most common hot-button issues and how participants, witnesses, and managers act when caught in the middle of conflict. Many of those stories exemplified success-ful conflict resolution, in which coworkers were able to get beyond upsetting interactions. But we saw just as many conflicts that were *not* resolved or that led to even worse outcomes.

How do organizations put good ideas for addressing polariza-tion into everyday practice? There are real steps to take to fulfill the concepts and wield the tools described thus far.

Here are a few actions that many executives are already taking in their own organizations to get a handle on the kind of talk that creates havoc in the workplace:

1. Model polarizing discussions for your workforce by demon-strating how disagreements (between leaders, as modeled by your behavior toward each other) do not have to escalate to disruption and disillusionment. The aim is to foster, and thereby normalize, difficult conversations.

2. Confine polarizing discussions among the workforce to a platform (e.g., Slack, Reddit) dedicated to hosting them. Leaders and the organization can benefit from an intentional effort to encourage transparent communication where it's going to happen anyway.

3. Include "management of polarizing discussions" as an element in performance appraisals and 360-degree leadership evaluations to assess managers' ability to foster and resolve polarization. It can also be used as a criterion in leadership development programs.

4. Create rewards and incentives (e.g., a cash bonus or paid time off) for individuals who participate in polarizing discussions without generating negative consequences or outcomes.

5. Make transparent to all stakeholders, including the public, the fact that polarizing discussions occur in the organization. This can be accomplished by recognizing such conversations as a part of your cultural values. (At SHRM, for example, one of our principles is "pushing back to move forward." Being overly agreeable and avoiding pushback, even when necessary, is something we identified in our organizational culture as counterproductive.)

These were the top five practices described by 1,200 global leaders across eighteen major industries for tackling taboo talk in the workplace, according to a recent SHRM survey.[13] (This set of raw data is still under analysis; when finalized, it will be added to a report already online.)

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[13]Society for Human Resource Management, *The Culture Effect: Why a Positive Workplace Culture is the New Currency*, 2021, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/documents/2021%20culture%20refresh%20report.pdf.

A WORD ON TRANSPARENCY

Most organizations dealing with difficult conversations on taboo topics prefer to keep them behind the scenes, but I believe that all may be better served when organizations demonstrate to their stakeholders how they handle such controversies. These issues are common, after all. Perhaps the best strategy is to share, rather than withhold, our approaches to these situations.

Sharing information about organizational challenges and successes allows a wider population of leaders to go past commiseration toward mutual education. Executives, managers, and HR professionals can learn from one another in their efforts to contribute to better lives for all, especially today's multigenerational workforce that is unafraid to share its multitude of perspectives.

Some say "Sharing is caring," but I go beyond that and say, "Sharing is baring." When we bare all by engaging in taboo talk, we're more vulnerable—but more relatable too. That brings us back to the importance of empathy in managing taboo talk in the workplace.

EMPATHY VERSUS "ME-PATHY"

SHRM's empathetic CEO Johnny C. Taylor Jr. speaks out frequently on society's growing "empathy deficit" and how it is experienced in modern organizations worldwide. The rancor reported in the news over vaccine mandates, corporate responses to social injustice, the essential workforce, and hybrid/remote office arrangements (to name just a few issues) reveals a distinct lack of empathy among a significant percentage of the populace.

This is apparent from new SHRM research currently being analyzed. We asked thirty-three thousand workers in industries across the United States to describe their organizations pre- and postpandemic. ("Post" meant after the major quarantines and economic

shutdowns of 2020; the pandemic itself, unfortunately, is continuing.) The adjectives they used to characterize their workplaces in each time period are depicted in Figure 9.1.

The most dramatic descriptive changes were the drop in empathy and rise in adaptability. "Empathetic" was the adjective that employees used first to describe their workplaces before the COVID-19 crisis, but that term fell to fifth place afterward. By contrast, "adaptable" was the adjective that employees used first to describe their workplaces after the crisis; it had been in fourth place earlier.

The quantitative data revealed two other noticeable before-and-after changes in how employees perceived their organizations: as (1) less "demanding" and "exhausting" and (2) more "honest" and "inclusive."

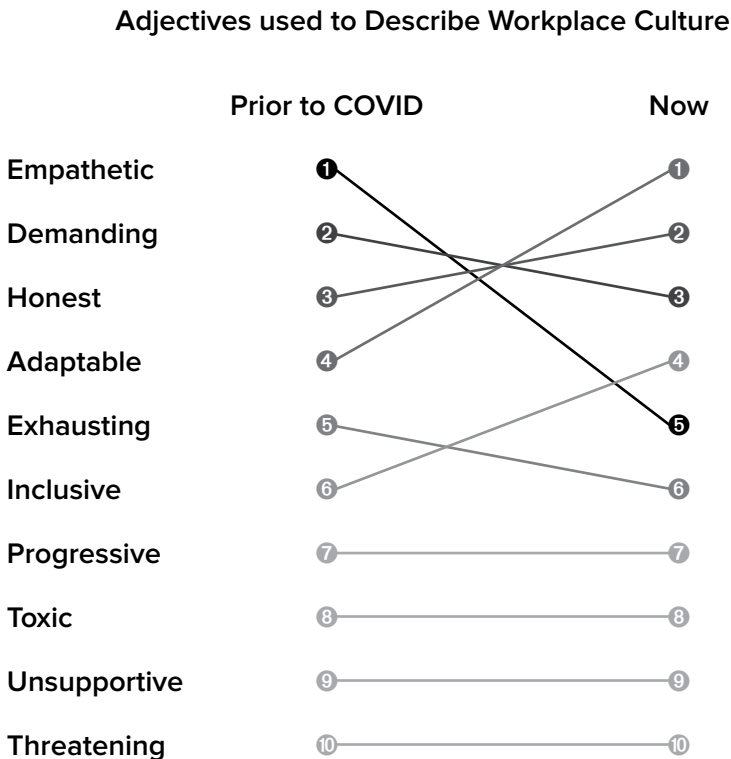## Adjectives used to Describe Workplace Culture

Figure 9.1.   Describing workplace culture pre- and postpandemic

The qualitative data gives context to these descriptions. As their organizations responded to a stressful situation, employees perceived that people engaged with one another less empathetically. The lower level of empathy indicates that people were unable to establish relational communalities (see Chapter 3) and talk about taboo topics in a productive way. The higher level of honesty, on the other hand, reflects their organizations' efforts to reframe the culture toward direct communication and transparency, even concerning taboo topics.

Why did empathy diminish during the crisis? Do we really prefer agitated debate over civil discussion? Is winning an argument so important?

Do people even understand what empathy really is?

I conducted an informal, unscientific survey of my own and asked a few random acquaintances to define empathy. Most of their definitions related to the ability to take on, or be sensitive to, someone else's perspectives. When I asked for examples of empathetic *behavior*, however, they described situations in which someone else accepted *their* opinions or agreed with *their* perspectives!

Clearly there is a breakdown between the textbook definition of the concept of empathy and an understanding of how it is practiced.

The behavior that my informal survey respondents actually described—receiving empathy from others and misinterpreting that as tacit agreement with one's own perspectives—is not empathy. Empathy is offering sensitivity and understanding *to* others in an effort to experience what *they* are feeling and thinking. Their definition confused the give-and-take: offering is not receiving, and experience is not agreement. *That* is "me-pathy"—emphasis on *me*.

I find this neologism useful to sum up the opposite of empathy. People have defined it in several recognizable ways: "selfish, thoughtless . . . self-absorbed";[14] "cannot relate to the suffering or

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[14]mjake1, "mepathy," Urban Dictionary, August 7, 2011, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Mepathy.

needs of others";[15] "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another about an issue, but only after the issue has directly affected you."[16]

The contemporary workplace seems to have too much *me* and not enough *us*. Surely a workforce can be self-confident in attitude and action without being self-absorbed.

Empathy requires an orientation toward others before a focus on the self. Empathy emphasizes selflessness; "me-pathy" emphasizes selfishness. Is it better to be selfless or selfish? Both qualities are part of being human.

At least one cultural critic has argued that "one cannot live a human life without acts of selflessness," yet without some degree of selfishness, "you jeopardize the most important person of them all: you. . . . It is when we begin to selfishly love ourselves and selflessly love others that we become in touch with our humanity." She concludes that "this world needs the human in you."[17]

I conclude that what the *working* world needs most is the empathy in all of us.

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[15]Reflecting back, "Mepathy," Urban Dictionary, June 29, 2020, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Mepathy.

[16]Deb Milbrath, "MEpathy," Cartoon Movement, September 16, 2018, https://cartoonmovement.com/cartoon/mepathy.

[17]Sheena Amin, "Selfishness and Selflessness: This World Needs the Human in You," *HuffPost*, updated June 4, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/selfishness-and-selflessness-this-world-needs-the_b_591bd667e4b021dd5a828ffd.