

# Silent Agreements: What We Don't Say at the Workplace

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Aside from our family and intimate relationships, there is probably no other aspect of our lives as fraught with silent agreements as our work relationships. *Silent agreements* are the assumptions and unspoken expectations we carry within ourselves, often without our being aware of them. These silent agreements underlay all our workplace activities and can be the impetus for our success. Unfortunately, they can also become problematic when we assume the people with whom we are interacting recognize and accept what it is that we believe to be true.

The silent agreements we each make with ourselves sometimes come into conflict. Essentially workplace landmines, these miscommunications can have an explosive effect on the organization's bottom line, whether the conflict is between employees and their supervisors or among coworkers.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THESE WORKPLACE LANDMINES?

Small maladies in the workplace can be topics we ignore, minimize, or deny at first but that grow into long-term problems. For example:

- ❑ *Burnout*: A silent agreement that carries the collateral costs associated with getting things done at too high a price.
- ❑ *Breaches in confidentiality*: A scale that tips both ways, whether people are whistleblowers or use gossip as a weapon.

- ❑ *Substance abuse*: Embedded with silent agreements, a specter that haunts all levels of the organization, from the locker room to the boardroom.
- ❑ *Unhealthy competition*: Silent agreements to win at any cost, meaning the ends justify the means, despite best performance.
- ❑ *Workplace romances*: When our silent agreements weave a web we cannot extricate ourselves from, no matter what.
- ❑ *Performance appraisals*: Yardsticks that can become whips in inexperienced hands.
- ❑ *Hiring selection and unconscious bias*: The silent agreement to hire only people like ourselves.

## SILENT AGREEMENTS IN CONFLICT

How often do supervisors have nagging thoughts like, "Why aren't you contributing more to the bottom line?" Or an overworked employee might be thinking, "Why does all the work fall on our team's shoulders when we didn't create the problem in the first place?" These internal conversations are going on all around us as well as within us, as we prepare for a meeting, text during the meeting, and resume work after the meeting. Silent agreements can dominate our e-mails, too, if we use them as a vehicle to exchange our suspicions and accusations.

Let's look at some ways these silent agreements cause problems in the workplace.

## Two Types of Insecurity

Jennifer and her new supervisor, Bob, are not getting along. During the last department meeting, Bob admonished Jennifer for her recent lateness—in front of everyone. Jennifer is a single mother with a long commute. Her last supervisor was flexible and understanding; as long as Jennifer completed her work, her lateness was not an issue. Also, Jennifer is secretly competitive and wants to get ahead, but with her mild demeanor and the transportation challenges, she does not give the impression that she wants to move up the ladder. So Bob's public admonishment about her lateness makes her furious. After the meeting, Jennifer sends an e-mail to all of the meeting participants, criticizing Bob for inappropriately reprimanding her.

Jennifer feels incapable of negotiating her work schedule with this more demanding boss. She also has a silent agreement with herself to hide her own ambition from others, for fear it will make her seem threatening. So she was very upset by her boss's public admonishment, which she felt made her seem uncaring about her work. Unfortunately, she reacted angrily through her e-mail blast instead of facing her boss and acknowledging how important it was to her to be successful and move forward.

Meanwhile, Bob's behavior reflects his silent agreement to prove that he is a unilaterally fair and competent supervisor who takes charge and tolerates no nonsense. Inwardly, he is afraid that he will not be able to build a team that works well together and supports his efforts if he allows "flexibility and understanding." He is particularly anxious about Jennifer because she was known to be the previous supervisor's favorite.

Rather than acknowledge that each wants what is best for the team, they both remain stuck in their silent agreements, where their senses of personal insecurity work to their mutual disadvantage. Jennifer doesn't get the support she needs to succeed, and Bob fails to devise an option that allows for flexibility.

## Unconscious Bias and Resistance to Change

While transformative change is often a primary directive for organizations, there is often an unspoken assumption that things will in fact remain the same. The phrase "it's the way we have always done it" gets bantered around, as if it carried the power to heal whatever may be ailing the company. This type of thinking is a silent agreement among many in the company that impedes overall growth. The competitive and often political nature of the workplace makes it harder to uncover the silent agreements that exist in unchallenged work patterns. They are often nestled deep within the values and culture of the organization. Any attempt to uncover or dismantle them has consequences.

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Silent agreements are perhaps most harmful when they take the form of hiring bias. We live in a country that promises if you work hard, you will succeed, and even if you start at the bottom, you can work your way up to the top. Yet the reality is that there are silent agreements, or biases, that keep this from happening. The ability to recognize and admit these unconscious biases is essential to having a healthy, successful organization.

That success ultimately rests on hiring the best talent, even if it challenges the traditional notions and cultural stereotypes, because it invites the opportunity to process multiple perspectives. Being aware of the impact and possible barriers these biases may represent in personnel decisions creates a culture of authentic opportunity where open dialogue replaces silent agreements.

Most of us don't like to think of ourselves as being biased, yet we are often reluctant to challenge the hiring traditions in our workplaces. Often, we erroneously believe our silent agreements are accepted by others, assuming we all share the same understanding or meaning of an unspoken expectation. Take, for example, the company president who recognizes there are no women in upper-management positions and who has made a silent agreement with himself to change that dynamic. Unfortunately, he has not communicated that goal to the rest of his team, believing that their perception aligns with his, only to discover later that they are undermining his requests to create a more globally invested unit. He asks, "How else are we to bring about change?" Forward thinking does not have progressive results if it is not shared with those who are accountable, receptive, and responsible for achieving it, as well as with those who it will ultimately be affected by the change.

### **Perception or Reality in Performance Evaluations**

It is an understatement to say that work appraisals are two-edged swords: they attempt to gauge the value of an employee to the organization while offering prescriptive solutions for improvement, all within the parameters of what the company needs and

finds acceptable. Often, performance evaluations are tied to merit raises, so the stakes are high for both evaluator and employee.

The company assumes that the perceptions of the supervisor are accurate and objective. The supervisor's silent agreements, which come into play well before assessment commences, are his or her view of an employee's "value worthiness." That perception prevails regardless of what the employee may feel about his or her worth to the company.

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The performance evaluation and the silent agreement exist side by side. One dictates the trajectory of the employee at the company, and the other determines his or her self-worth as the employee sees it. Words matter especially here. Often, newly promoted supervisors are not taught the tacit implications or subtle differences that a good choice of words can make; the initiate may not be familiar with or equipped to handle the psychological impact of a seemingly lackluster evaluation or what certain negative nuances may suggest. Often, the two perceptions support one another, but when they don't align, that can fuel resentment for all and disciplinary action in some cases.

### **Will the Real Employee Please Stand Up?**

Brad has an off-site online persona that puts the company at risk because of his seemingly risqué and inappropriate posts. He feels what he does on his own time is no one else's business, and his silent agreement is that

others agree. Even though Brad is not using the company's equipment or time to engage in his fantasies, he does contact coworkers to describe his cyber exploits and flaunt his online alter ego. Those coworkers begin to question Brad's motivations and speculate why he has this need to be someone else outside of work. On the other hand, Brad is proud of his skill and cunning in keeping his "followers" interested in his activities, and he has built quite a reputation in that domain. The dilemma begins when the coworkers start to feel uncomfortable about working with Brad and report their feelings to his supervisor. It's then that Brad's silent agreement starts to unravel.

This type of silent agreement is sure to undermine us when we have not understood the cultural and legal context of the workplace. It takes emotional maturity to recognize that what we believe is truly important or acceptable may not always be what others approve of or perceive as important, particularly at work.

### **Self-Care and Burnout**

When we are committed to the trappings of success at any cost, or when our work starts to become the most essential part of our life, our silent agreements are undermining us. Take Robin, for example. Her silent agreement evolved out of management's silently endorsing her working late into the night without compensation, and her always being available despite the fact that she has a family with children. The company is willing to turn a blind eye because she is so productive, often encouraging the behavior with praise, awards, or special perks. Her supervisor was once heard saying, "She basically does the work of three men and never complains."

Unfortunately, her silent agreement to achieve success is an ever-widening road toward diminished returns. In essence, she is coauthoring a silent agreement that can ruin her life, as both parties simply ignore or belittle the long-term effects of burnout—the fatigue or insomnia, possible substance abuse, heart disease, or even clinical depression. The organization's denial serves a dual purpose: it promotes the belief that extraordinary performance can be sustained over a long period without negative consequences, and it prolongs the benefits derived from the exceptional employee. In essence, the company really is devaluing the employee by limiting its perception of her value. The result? Burnout, with the comment, "We could all see this coming," heard in the corridor chatter outside the conference room.

Burnout thrives in the domain of having to get everything done perfectly and on time. We are told that this is essential for corporate success. And it often is the employee who most embodies that mind-set, with silent agreements like, "You can rest when you have exceeded your goals and accomplished your dreams." It's a feeling similar to the conflicting emotions surrounding a promotion, marked by equal amounts of exhilaration and apprehension. But silent agreements like this foster burnout, which is destructive for the person, his or her family, and the company.

### **CHANGING THE WORKPLACE CONVERSATION**

When we are engaged in problem solving at work, we often respond or behave as if our belief is the only correct one; we don't fully understand or reflect on the process with others whose opinions we hold in high regard. That is, we are thinking one way

about a situation, and we don't take the time to explore alternative perspectives. Our silent agreements hold sway in our decisions and actions.

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If we want something to change, however, we have to put it out there for input from others. Ultimately, it's *how* we communicate sensitive topics that makes the critical difference. Our communications need to be clear and not representative of a single, silently held perspective. A blueprint for real change

in an organization will take into cultural consideration the varying degrees of tension that will naturally result from addressing silent agreements that affect the quality of life. Open discussion is a natural and expected outgrowth of engaged communication.

It is key to acknowledge the role that silent agreements play in thwarting workplace change, such as those present in unconscious bias in hiring, insensitive performance evaluation, subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) online and offline discourse that affects the workplace culture, and productivity pressures that spur employee burnout. Organizations can find success by fostering changes to individuals' silent agreements, thereby preventing the long-term, complex problems these agreements can cause.

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