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Careless Conversations, Costly Mistakes

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Careless Conversations, Costly Mistakes

Coercive Managers and Organisations in the Litigious Spotlight

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Abstract: Despite what we know about the psychology of human behaviour at work and communication, careless conversations on the part of managers to each other and to other employees have an enormous human resource cost to organisations and, emotionally, to those involved. This paper is based on a number of case studies in which careless conversations by managers have led to: workers compensation claims; sick leave; prolongation of workers compensation and sick leave; staff turnover; organisational ineffectiveness; low morale; and mental and physical illness. These case studies have unearthed several manifestations of careless conversations. These include: inappropriate emotional responses on the part of managers; a failure to recognise the impact of punishment for what are relatively minor breaches of policy on hard working employees; covert punishment; lack of recognition for hard work; job insecurity; favouritism; unresolved conflict; inability to deal with people in distress; ignoring the prompt resolution of work problems; workers compensation paralysis; ignoring issues of justice; and ignorance of individual styles and needs. The reasons for this behaviour are discussed and we argue that this is largely a preventable problem and provide a number of solutions.

Keywords: Careless conversation, Workers compensation, Sick leave, Organisational ineffectiveness, Job stress, Psychological contract, Emotional intelligence, Corporate citizenship

Voices from the Clinic

THIS PAPER BEGINS with the presentation of some clinical observations about the effects of careless conversations that occur in workplaces on the victims and organisations. A case study is then provided as one example of a set of careless conversations and their sequelae. Following the case study, a detailed examination of the problem and some suggested ways forward are discussed with reference to the relevant literature.

Over the past 20 years or so, in his role as a psychotherapist and organisatonal coach, the senior author (Hase) has seen first hand the effects of careless conversations in the workplace. These careless conversations largely consist of incompetence and mismanagement on the part of the manager or the organisation. Of course, organisations don't actually do anything; people do.

Careless conversations are a different class of events to bullying, which are:

> … repeated and persistent negative acts that are directed towards one or several individuals, and which create a hostile work environment. In bullying the targeted person has difficulties in defending himself; it is therefore not a conflict between parties of equal strength (Salin, 2001: 431).

Rather, careless conversations consist of incompetent behaviour on the part of managers or those in authority. This incompetence can range from "throwaway lines", displaced emotion, failure to understand the impact of workload and the nature of work on people, avoidance, and (most commonly) mismanaging situations through poor judgment and then not rectifying the situation.

The effects on the "victim" can be devastating. Depending on the individual, the initial effect of a careless conversation can be any one, or an amalgam of, anger, anxiety, frustration, helplessness and preoccupation with the event. If the issue is not resolved quickly and well by the organisation, then the risk of psychopathology for the individual and cost to the organisation becomes greater. Our experience is that speedy resolution is a key issue in reducing the effect of a careless conversation on the victim and the organisation in terms of loss of productivity and higher insurance premiums as the case deteriorates to become a workers' compensation claim. Psychopathology in the individual can take the form of depression and any number of debilitating anxiety disorders.

There appear to be a number of features, in the senior author's experience "in the clinic", common to people's reactions to careless conversations. It seems that those people who see themselves as loyal and hardworking experience injustice in the workplace very deeply. A schoolteacher, for example,

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freely spent her spare time at weekends and holidays organising and chaperoning educational trips for students. There was no extra kudos or pay for this; rather, it was simply a matter of being a good corporate citizen (Organ, 1988; 1990; Schanke, 1991; Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1999a; 1999b). Then during one trip a student took a piece of equipment from the school bus and it disappeared. Management reacted by suspending the teacher pending an investigation. This was a careless and very costly conversation by school management. The teacher explained to me, in this curious case, that the thing that really made her angry was the fact she had done so much for the students and the school; that she had been diligent and very loyal. And this was the way she was rewarded. The anger turned into a feeling of helplessness as time wore on and then to depression when the situation was still unresolved after several weeks. Thus, there were two careless conversations in this brief story. One was suspending the teacher without applying any sense of justice by assuming that the teacher was negligent. The second careless conversation was not resolving the issue quickly. The result of this case was that the teacher left her profession, it took months for her to recover from her illness (that had no other causes outside of this situational issue) and the school's insurance premiums went through the roof. One can only guess at the negative effect the event had on other staff.

Victims, like the one described above, often feel a sense of betrayal. Presumably this is not helped if the person has a strong sense of affiliation with the organisation or the work. Another strong emotion felt by these people is a loss of self-worth. Somehow, the victim feels that if the organisation doesn't care, then they, as an individual, are at fault or somehow not worth caring about. We're not sure that managers completely understand the powerful psychodynamics of the relationship between workers and their workplaces, and between themselves and their employees.

While a "justice gene" has yet to be found the senior author's experience is that humans have a strong need to be treated fairly. This constitutes a part of what is commonly known as the psychological contract (Rousseau and Greller, 1994) employees have with their employer. This will be discussed in more detail below. In the cases experienced "in the clinic', employers increase this sense of injustice by delaying resolution, being obstructive, being self-protective and by just being plain uncaring. The emotional sequelae to injustice are varied and include anger, helplessness, depression and anxiety.

People frequently feel as if they have been abused when they have been badly let down by careless conversations. Abuse can lead to a high level of uncertainty about what kind of response one is going to get from the abuser (individual or organisation). Abused people also feel that if they try harder or even hope harder, the abuser will show remorse and welcome them back. The effect of this is a disbelief that this could all be happening; a sense of confusion.

Feelings of powerlessness are also common among people who have been the recipients of careless conversations. Managers often do not understand the amount of power they have over their staff. The psychological reasons for this are complicated but they are based on how we learn early in life about ascribing power to those with positional authority (e.g. parents and then teachers). Managers and their staff play an intricate game in which one player can be nurturing or critical in a parental fashion. The other player wants positive acknowledgment from the other, like a child. Either can start the game, but control is nearly always in the hands of the manager.

Thus, careless conversations by managers or others in authority create enormous dilemmas for those on the receiving end. Initially there is confusion because recipients expect to be treated fairly and are desperately and variously seeking positive responses from the manager. Then, anger appears in response to a sense of injustice. Finally, victims become overwhelmed by disappointment and then powerlessness. It becomes clear to them that they are merely pawns and nothing can be done. Long-term careless conversations result in "learned helplessness", which is a precursor to depression. Some people react with anger and stay angry as their approach to dealing with authority. This anger is every bit as debilitating as helplessness because it completely preoccupies the thinking of the person as well as creating unpleasant physical reactions.

It is important to recognise that these reactions are not in themselves pathological. It is true that in a small number of cases the victim of a careless conversation has a history of psychopathology that confuses the issue and makes it difficult to understand cause, effect and heightened sensitivity. However, most victims of careless conversations do not have any pre-existing abnormal psychological condition, or history, and were functioning well before the incident. These reactions appear to be mostly normal responses to abnormal situations. Despite this, insurance companies (when the situation ends up being a workers' compensation claim) and employers frequently seek to avoid responsibility for careless conversations by managers and organisations by trying to blame the victim. It is interesting that the effect of this is to cause a very protracted resolution to the problem and increase costs dramatically. Worse, insurance companies and employers have no regard for the effect of their behaviour on the individual involved.

Another effect of the stress associated with careless conversations can be a disruption of the victim's normal relationships at home and at work. In addition, the person often experiences a disruption of normal routines, such as exercise and social events. This is particularly true when the situation has deteriorated into a workers compensation claim. The claimant often feels as if he or she will meet someone from work in the street or in a store and therefore stays at home more frequently, mimicking a mild agoraphobia.

The discussion above has presented some anecdotal evidence, from clinical cases, that careless conversations can be extremely costly for both individuals and organisations. Interestingly, they appear to mostly avoidable. The following case study is intended to illustrate in more detail the nature of careless conversations and their effects.

A Case in Point

This very expensive and avoidable case involved a 45-year-old female middle manager, whom we shall call Jean. She had about 20 staff reporting to her and she, in turn, reported to a female department head. Jean had been in her position for about 12 months and said she loved her job managing financial and other administrative matters for the department.

When Jean came to her first appointment with the senior author, she was clutching a doctor's referral and had been off work for about six weeks on workers' compensation leave. She was tearful and described a number of symptoms which included not being able to sleep, anxiety that increased when she went outside, crying, irritability, fatigue and being unable to stop thinking about what had happened at work. Jean was not clinically depressed but, nevertheless, not far away from needing treatment for this potentially debilitating condition. It is important to note that she had never previously had a psychological problem and had, in fact, been very healthy. Somewhat unusually, the insurer accepted the claim without question.

Jean said that the organisation had a policy that staff were not to receive cash payments for subscriptions and memberships. Instead, payments were to be made by credit card or cheque. This policy had been implemented previously due to a number of irregular accounting incidents. One of Jean's staff consistently refused to adhere to the policy and kept accepting cash payments, claiming that the policy disadvantaged customers. Jean added that this staff member was also a particularly aggressive person who frequently upset staff with his irritable manner and behaviour.

Each time Jean confronted him about accepting the payments the staff member would become agitated and then withdraw. Then he would go to Jean's boss who would placate him and say that it was fine for him to accept cash payments. It appeared that she was intimidated like everyone else. When Jean confronted her boss she would simply refuse to talk about it and dismiss the problem as trivial. Most carelessly, she would then tell Jean to deal with the problem. A few weeks would go by and then the staff member would accept another payment and the cycle would repeat itself.

Interestingly, Jean's staff appraisals were excellent and she had been rewarded twice by increases in classification over her two-year tenure in the job. She had put a great deal into her job by arriving early and staying late, taking work home and working hard to develop her team. Jean described herself as a dedicated employee and, because of this, she felt particularly let down by the organisation.

It was possible to track Jean's emotional distress over about a 12-month period. It had started as being mildly irritated, to experiencing sleep problems and bouts of influenza as the stress rose, and then a gradual decline to the time when she visited her doctor because she felt so unwell and could not understand what was happening to her. Her concentration had gradually deteriorated over time as had her problem-solving skills. Morale among her team was low because of the obvious conflict in the section.

The final straw that had resulted in her visiting the doctor was yet another confrontation with the staff member, who told her that he could do as he wanted and did not have to listen to anything Jean told him. Jean's boss had responded that she needed to find a way to manage the situation because she had received a complaint from the staff member that morning and she '…did not need the hassle'.

What made the matter even worse was that since she had been on leave, the organisation had done little to resolve what was really a very simple problem. Instead, despite urging from the doctor, the rehabilitation provider and the insurer meetings had been cancelled at the last minute. The reason given for this was that all the necessary people could not be gathered together. This was another careless conversation because it implied that neither the problem nor Jean were important. It transpired, after a short investigation, that it was Jean's boss who was never available and those above her were not sufficiently concerned about the problem to get her to comply. Apparently Jean's manager and her immediate superior were good friends, having been in the organisation for many years as colleagues. This was yet another careless conversation.

Four weeks later Jean was taking medication for depression because the situation was unresolved. She felt as if she was not valued and that what had happened was unjust. Jean wanted to return to work. From a clinical point of view, return to work would have been the best treatment for what was a situational problem rather than something intrinsically wrong with Jean herself.

Finally, a meeting was held after an appeal by the psychologist and her doctor to the State authority responsible for problems in the workplace. The session involved Jean, her boss and her manager. A mediator was employed and the rehabilitation coordinator was present. It was finally agreed that the policy should be implemented fully and that Jean should be supported in her role. Her manager agreed that she would refer the difficult staff member back to Jean when he went to see her rather than override her decisions.

So, two careless conversations. One involved a failure on the part of her boss to effectively manage the situation initially. The second was a more systemic problem involving the “old boys’ network” and a failure of duty of care for an employee. The result of these failures was enormous: Jean took months to get over her illness, which was a direct result of the careless conversation; there were 15 weeks of workers compensation payments as well as all the medical costs; an increase in the organisation’s insurance premiums resulted; and there was reduced output and morale in the section in which Jean worked.

This situation and its sequelae were totally avoidable by good conversations early in the course of events. The first of these would have been for Jean’s boss to have made it clear to the employee when he first went to see her that there was indeed a policy and that Jean was quite right to insist that it be adhered to. She could have immediately called Jean to her office and had a three-way conversation about the problem, dealing with it early and head-on. Another conversation could have been with Jean herself, in which she coached her in how to deal with this man. This may have occurred over a period of weeks using a supportive approach that recognised how difficult managing people can be and how management skill is developmental. She needed to not be intimidating but to use her positional power in a positive rather than negative way.

Coercion and Careless Conversations in the Workplace

As mentioned at the beginning, careless conversations are different to bullying and harassment although a case might be made that they are in the same class of events. For example, the law considers that bullying can consist of: shouting at someone, baiting and teasing, nasty practical jokes, gossiping, constant interruption, belittling someone’s opinion, excessive scrutiny of work, unfair criticism, setting impossible deadlines, taking credit for the work of someone else, ignoring or excluding someone, unfairly blocking promotion, the threat of or actual assault, and directing aggressive or frightening behaviour towards someone (Mahoney, 2002: 2). Harassment is sexual, or targets a person because of sex, race or other characteristics (Mahoney, 2002: 3).

One determining factor in the case of bullying is context and intent. Some of the behaviours described above could be included in a list of careless conversations. Others, such as threatening violence, would definitely not fit. Careless conversations occur as a result of incompetence. However, it is a fine line between the two and it would be interesting to see what would happen if more victims of careless conversations actually pursued a case of bullying. In many cases of management incompetence, however, it is not clear that bullying is actually involved. Perhaps careless conversations are closer to being negligent acts.

Bullying is usually defined as a series of events occurring over at least a period of six months, if not longer (Zapf and Gross, 2001). Incompetence can result in a series of careless conversations which erode the confidence of the individual. However, it can consist of a single, more devastating event which is then compounded by further carelessness as people within the organisations fail to deal with the situation appropriately. Liefoogue and Mackenzie-Davey (2001) found that bullying should be considered more broadly and include organisational practices as well as interpersonal acts.

While there may be differences in the definitions of bullying and careless conversations, there are similarities in the phenomena and their negative effects. The psychological effects of careless conversations on people are similar to those who have been bullied. Several studies have identified both physical and psychological health problems associated with bullying that include depression, low self-esteem, anxiety disorders, disturbed relationships at home and at work, and powerlessness (e.g. Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Hjelt-Back, 1994; Einarson and Raknes, 1997; O’Moore, Seigne, McGuire and Smith, 1998; Mahoney, 2002).

One important factor in bullying behaviour is that it can involve unequal power relationships. Thus, victims have unequal resources in the form of skills and access to key people such as senior management that they can use to deal with the problem (Einarsen, 2000). People on the receiving end of careless conversations frequently do not have the array of resources available to management, nor the skills to deal with the vagaries of a diffident bureaucracy.

According to Zapf and Gross (2001), once bullying becomes official, then it becomes easier, because of previous stigmatisation of the person, to blame the victim. This can also occur in cases of careless conversations when the victim complains to a higher authority. The person becomes more prone to attack, rather than the situation being examined closely. It is interesting to watch management polarise and subsequently close ranks when there is the risk of being put under the microscope. This can be compared to what happens to whistleblowers. In many organisations, it is not the done thing to complain or act counter to cultural norms. One is expected to be silent, deal with the situation oneself and not rock the boat. The more extreme effect of whistle blowing is ostracism and, ultimately, victimisation. People who criticise incompetence in the form of careless conversations can be the result of similar behaviours and, in particular, a closing of ranks.

There has been some research into the personality of abusive managers in workplaces. Traits such as argumentativeness, narcissism, interpersonal insensitivity, perfectionism, impulsivity and fear of failure have been associated with abusive behaviour (Hughes et al, 1999). Severe anxiety has also been associated with abusive behaviour as a means to protecting one's position (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997). It is not clear how personality relates to the careless conversation being examined here. Incompetence, given that there is no conscious or unconscious intent to overpower, is probably not personality based. The question arises here as to the extent to which lack of personal insight can be a defence against incompetence. The traditional approach would be to think of this as a skill problem; and the answer, to increase the person's emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1985; 1996). Alternatively, one might ask whether good managers or leaders have particular personality traits that should be a determining factor in their appointment to a position of authority (Mechanic, 1962; Laurent, 1978).

Another way of understanding the effects of careless conversations is as a violation of the psychological contract. According to Rousseau and Greller (1994), a psychological contract is defined as the individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of an exchange agreement between that person and another party. A balanced psychological contract is a prerequisite for an ongoing and harmonious relationship between an employee and the organization. The psychological contract depends on the degree to which employees' expectations of what the organization will provide, and what is owed in return, match the organization's expectations of what it will give and get (Sims, 1994).

Thus, the psychological contract is an implicit agreement between employer and employee that each party will treat the other fairly. It is based on presumably shared beliefs (Schein, 1980; Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn, 1985; Tornow, 1988). Because it is unwritten and unofficial, and therefore not legally binding, the motivation for compliance is not, as it is with explicit written contracts, the fear of legal reprisal but, rather, the desire to maintain mutual trust. It, thus, constitutes an essentially emotional bond. The psychological contract, therefore, is promise-based. As a consequence, a violation of this contract results in more intense attitudinal and emotional responses than even unmet expectations (Rousseau, 2001). Thus, when people experience a careless conversation and its *sequelae*, there is an emotional response based on a loss of trust and feelings of injustice.

What makes psychological contracts more complicated, however, is that they are dynamic and highly subjective (Hiltrop, 1996) so that people make additions to the contract 'as they go along'. Impressions are made from the way others are treated, from conversations and from the behaviour of those in control. While Schein (1980) and Rousseau (2001) acknowledge the role of schema in the development of psychological contracts, little has been said about the expectations or needs of the individual. The need for approval, for example, is an underpinning principle in Theory Y behaviour in organizations (McGregor, 1960). Some people need more recognition than others and some react with extreme anger or anxiety when their ego is threatened by some negative external behaviour. Rather than blaming people who react to careless conversations and behaviour, however, it is incumbent on managers to be more aware of the impact of what they do on individuals (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001a; 2001b).

The evidence demonstrating the negative effects of stress in the workplace is enormous. Careless conversations are a significant stressor for employees. As just one example in this literature, a review of studies undertaken in Britain between 1990 and 1999 reveals that the causes of stress include, *inter alia*, interpersonal conflict, lack of managerial support and lack of control over work activities (Tearle, 2002). In turn, the effects of stress include high levels of sick leave, reduced work performance, a transfer of stress between employees and increased likelihood of workers compensation claims.

Tearle (2002) indicated that there is an increasing legal imperative for organisations to examine how they deal with stress. Certainly, that is the case of bullying and harassment in many countries where such behaviour is illegal. It is open to debate as to whether careless conversations based on incompetence can be considered in the same light. Competency-based training and the assessment of competency is a key approach to developing a skilled workforce in some industrialised countries. In Australia, for example, it is incumbent on the organisation to ensure the competency of its employees and failure to do so can have legal repercussions for management (Hase and Saenger, 2003). It remains to be seen if interpersonal incompetence or lack of emotional intelligence has similar ramifications.

As well as the cost to the individual, careless conversations can be very costly to the organisation. For example, Mahoney (2002: 3), has identified some effects of bullying that have been identified in the cases described above. These are absenteeism, increased errors at work, low morale, decrease in productivity, resignations, industrial unrest and lost opportunity costs. Bullies are just bad for business (Gregory, 1999). The clinical experience of careless conversations suggests there may be similar costs to organisations.

Conclusions and Implications

The clinical observations and selected review of the literature on bullying behaviour suggest a number of issues to be considered by managers in relation to careless conversations. First, it is important to recognise that careless conversations are almost entirely preventable and that they are unacceptable. This understanding needs to be both personalised by individuals and systematised in organisations.

The second point is the appropriate recognition be given and action when careless conversations are identified. The key here is early rectification rather than allowing the situation to be protracted. This is less likely to result in combining errors as people begin to close ranks, blame the victim and find ways to protect themselves. All these are aspects of the ‘dark side of the organisation’ (Hase, Davies and Dick, 1999). It takes a mature organisational culture and a fair degree of emotional intelligence on the part of managers to respond this effectively.

The third issue is that there is no excuse for careless conversations given what is known about effective communication described extensively in the psychological literature. This is also true regarding stress and how to promote a low stress environment. The ability to demonstrate these competencies, and to maintain this competence, should be a part of the training, recruitment and performance management of managers and others in authority.

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