



Preventing Strained Communications

Strong communications are critical to supporting, guiding, and influencing; a leader's connections with others heighten the ability to influence, as well as quantity and quality of work performance.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Aug 01, 2016

Ever wonder why relationships that begin on strongly positive notes sour? Deteriorate sometimes to the point that people who thought the world and stars of their partners become so disenchanted they go 180 degrees to not being able to stand being around them, even to looking to undercut them?

According to more than 30 years of research by the Gottman Institute, the "Four Horsemen" are specific destructive communication patterns that first erode, then sever relationships: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling. And his studies reveal that, of these, Contempt is the worst, the most responsible for curdling connections and biggest predictor of divorce.

While Gottman's studies were done with married and other committed couples, my experience is his findings are also relevant to employee relations. Numerous recent polls harshly show worker disengagement is rampant. Our own experience is consistent; we've frequently seen enthusiastically motivated employees become turned off, even embittered, reacting to their perceived treatment from leaders. And this often occurs around workplace Safety.

One essential aspect of leadership is building and sustaining effective relationships. Strong communications are critical to supporting, guiding, and influencing; a leader's connections with others heighten the ability to influence, as well as quantity and quality of work performance. On the flip side, leaders risk becoming ineffectual when their ability to make things happen withers. Even dribbles of disdain sever connections, plummet persuasion, and kill internal motivation to work, while

withering workers' willingness to offer needed honest feedback or potentially more effective approaches.

Contempt rears its ugliness when someone acts "superior" to others, belittles them, sends the message they're insignificant or are idiots. Think of this as "dissing" others: disparaging, discounting, discrediting, disregarding, discouraging, disapproving, and even dismissing another.

As I mentioned, this happens in Safety way too frequently, disabling receptivity to Safety and internal Safety motivation. And of all Safety issues, soft tissue injuries —strains and sprains to the back, shoulders, knees and other areas— are often the target of many leaders' contempt-riddled reactions and communications. From some three decades of working to considerably prevent sprains and strains, I get that these injuries are both pervasive and frustrating for many managers. They often drag down a company's Safety record—typically worsening as a workforce ages—despite managers thinking they've "tried everything." But it's critical that leaders first hold themselves accountable by monitoring their own reactions and actions, then not allow any frustration to degrade into contemptuous messages. Even when such injuries are not as obviously visible as, say, a compound fracture, abrasion, cut, or bruise.

Have you heard this? Leaders who question workers, implying they are faking a soft-tissue injury? Despite studies that show 95-97 percent of those reported are real? Falsely accusing workers is an all-too-common way of communicating contempt, creating pushback and disengagement.

Or managers who question whether these injuries actually occurred at home, thinking workers misrepresented them as job-related to qualify for workers' comp coverage? These accusations tick off employees when they feel falsely accused. Studies consistently show back injuries are overwhelmingly cumulative, with physical stresses mounting from countless tasks stemming both from at-work and at-home activities (often without being able to determine specific contributors). Pointed or even "humorous" accusations are expressions of contempt, suggesting workers are shirkers, schemers, or liars.

Or leaders who communicate "all injuries are stupid" (heard that many times), or that workers were "just not paying attention" (code for "you're a dork")? Or labeling an employee as "clumsy" or "an accident waiting to happen"? Suggesting an injury was the result of horseplay (code for: "You're an out of control child")? Telling workers, "You're making us/me look bad" (code for "Our safety record is more important than your personal safety")? Other behaviors like: rolling eyes,

mean-mugging, using a sarcastic tone of voice, or overpowering. How many of these have you seen in response to an injury report?

Instead, let the air out of the dark balloon of contempt before it blows up in someone's face. Show and communicate admiration, respect, and the value of other company members. Communicate in word and actions their importance to their personal and others' Safety and to the company mission. In general, default toward nurturing others, rather than tearing them down. When it does come time to discipline, do so privately; criticizing someone in front of others displays contempt at its height. This belittles them both in their own and in their co-workers' eyes and minds, exponentially inflating even a slightly negative message. Worse, publicly reaming someone also stimulates defensive cover-their-rear reactions—the wrong kind of self-protective behavior—rather than encouraging problem solving and self-responsible mindsets.

As critical, a leader's contemptuous outlook can be insidious. Only focusing on blaming others for injuries diverts attention from looking for non-obvious contributing factors that might be readily addressed.

I suspect no one is immune to harboring contemptuous thoughts. When such cross my mind, I try to reduce these as soon as possible, balancing them off by reminding myself this is my frustration or anger petulantly talking, that no one wants to get hurt, that there may be other factors that I'm not seeing, considering how I as a leader might have had some responsibility in the incident. I exhale deeply to blow off my judgementalness before it can build into a destructive lashing out. I remind myself of organizational guru Gordon Lippitt's advice to "look at the issues involved coldly and the people involved warmly."

Contempt and disdain can poison a relationship. If you feel superior to others and act contemptuous of them, you create or reinforce a chasm of distrust, a bifurcation of perspectives and opinions. Your opportunities for influence are limited, and eventually something will break. Leaders who value engagement can best start by mindfully monitoring their own mindset and then controlling their own communications so that these build, not tear down, work relationships in Safety and everywhere.

About the Author

Robert Pater is Managing Director of Strategic Safety Associates and MoveSMART®. To contact him, email rpater@movesmart.com.