

Is a failure to communicate wasting more than just time?

New research shows every conversation failure costs an organisation between R100,000 and R200,000 and more than seven workdays.



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Recent South African research from The Human Edge shows that workplace conversation failures are both common and costly. Helene Vermaak, director at The Human Edge, says that there is a severe cost of silence affecting the bottom-line of organisations and yet only 6% of people feel confident enough to speak up.

In a study of 1,163 South African senior managers, an astounding 74% of respondents reported instances when they or others failed to speak up effectively when a peer did not pull his or her weight. 50% reported a failure to address disrespect and 48% of employees let peers slide when they skirted important workplace processes.

According to the data, the majority of the workforce is guilty of similar conversation failures. Specifically, half waste seven days or more avoiding these crucial conversations and 34% estimate they waste two full work weeks or more mulling over the problem. Our respondents estimate their avoidance costs their organisations between R100,000 and R200,000 per conversation in time and resources, with 28% estimating the cost to exceed R500,000.

The research also shows that employees are not having the right conversations and in most cases they are unable to address the disagreement. Instead of speaking up, people report engaging in resource-sapping avoidance tactics including complaining to others (60%), doing unnecessary work (58%) and getting angry about the problem (41%).



Vermaak says that many individuals lack the skills that enable them to speak up – providing direct feedback, even if it risks disagreement. “The problem is not that there are problems, the problem is that people don’t know how to effectively deal with the problems.”

And beyond the jaw-dropping dollar figures, the secondary costs are also alarming. Respondents report that these conversation failures had damaging effects to employee morale and engagement, relationships, corporate culture, project timelines and budgets and organisational reputation.

“Behaviour needs to match the brand and if it doesn’t, no amount of time and investment can make it successful,” says Jay Owens, Director at The Human Edge. “Accountability on all levels is vital and by creating an environment of open dialogue, managers are able to focus on the strategic thinking.”

Owens likens organisational culture to a chocolate brownie study undertaken by the company’s US partner, VitalSmarts –

see the study [here](#). He says management needs to identify the undiscussables in their organisations – what are people not being honest and up front about, what are they not saying and how is this affecting organisational performance?

Vermaak says that this study confirms that one of the most costly barriers to organisational performance is unresolved crucial conversations. “Knowing how to speak up means not having to waste time avoiding crucial issues, because you have the confidence and skills to raise them in a way that leads to productive dialogue, improved results and healthier relationships.”

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