



# Distance is Destroying Dialogue

How to Hold Crucial Conversations in a Virtual World



## Introduction

For many people, working from home has been a perk of the COVID-19 pandemic. The flexibility and autonomy workers desired for years became a forced reality overnight.

But a new study from VitalSmarts, a leader in corporate learning and development, found that while work-from-home may have boosted employee satisfaction, it also **negatively and significantly impacted a key performance indicator—communication.**

In this guide, we outline six tips to holding conversations virtually. Teams that feel enabled and encouraged to speak up when they have questions, see concerns, or want to share a new perspective are more motivated, engaged, and productive.

# Hiding Behind a Screen

Without impromptu meet-ups and physical proximity, many people find it that much easier to let crucial conversations fester and grow.

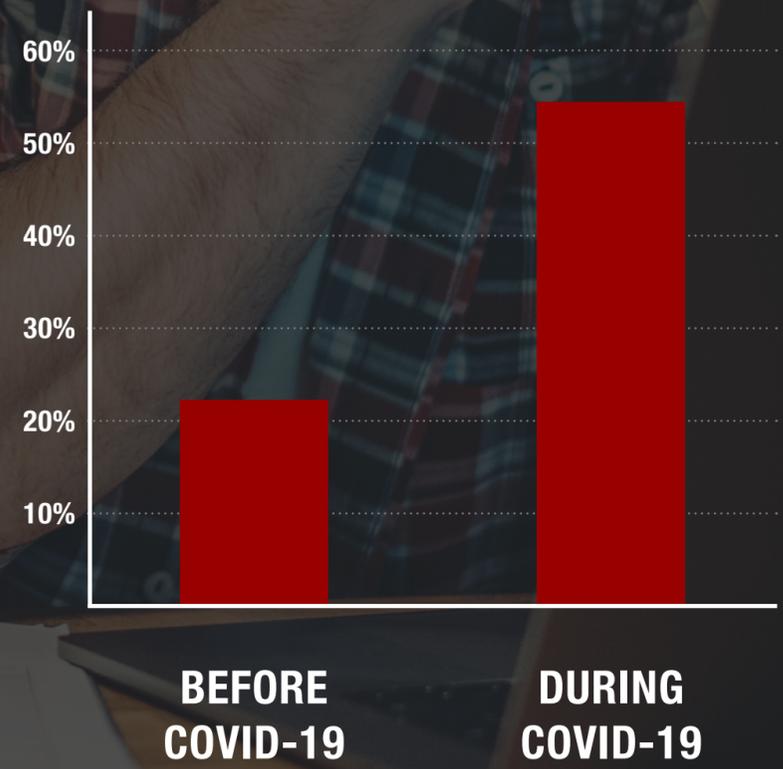
According to our online study of 1,145 people conducted earlier this year, **people are more than twice as likely to avoid speaking up about concerns with colleagues and managers virtually than when they worked together in person.**

This silence has led to more unresolved issues that are harming employees and the organization's bottom line.





% OF EMPLOYEES WHO LET A PROBLEM DRAG ON FOR A FEW WEEKS



## Feeling the Frustration

The silo of silence that can easily be built by working from home can be a breeding ground where concerns gather and grow. According to our research responses, top frustrations remote employees had with their coworkers or managers include:

- Not following through with commitments
- Making changes to projects unilaterally or without warning
- Giving half-hearted commitment to their priorities
- Didn't give warning when they were going to miss a deadline

When these types of concerns and frustrations popped up before the pandemic, 22 percent of respondents say they let the problem drag on for a few weeks before trying to address the issue.

**But in the past year, that number has more than doubled. Now, 54 percent admit to letting their concerns go unresolved for weeks before saying anything.**

**DISTANCE IS DESTROYING DIALOGUE.**

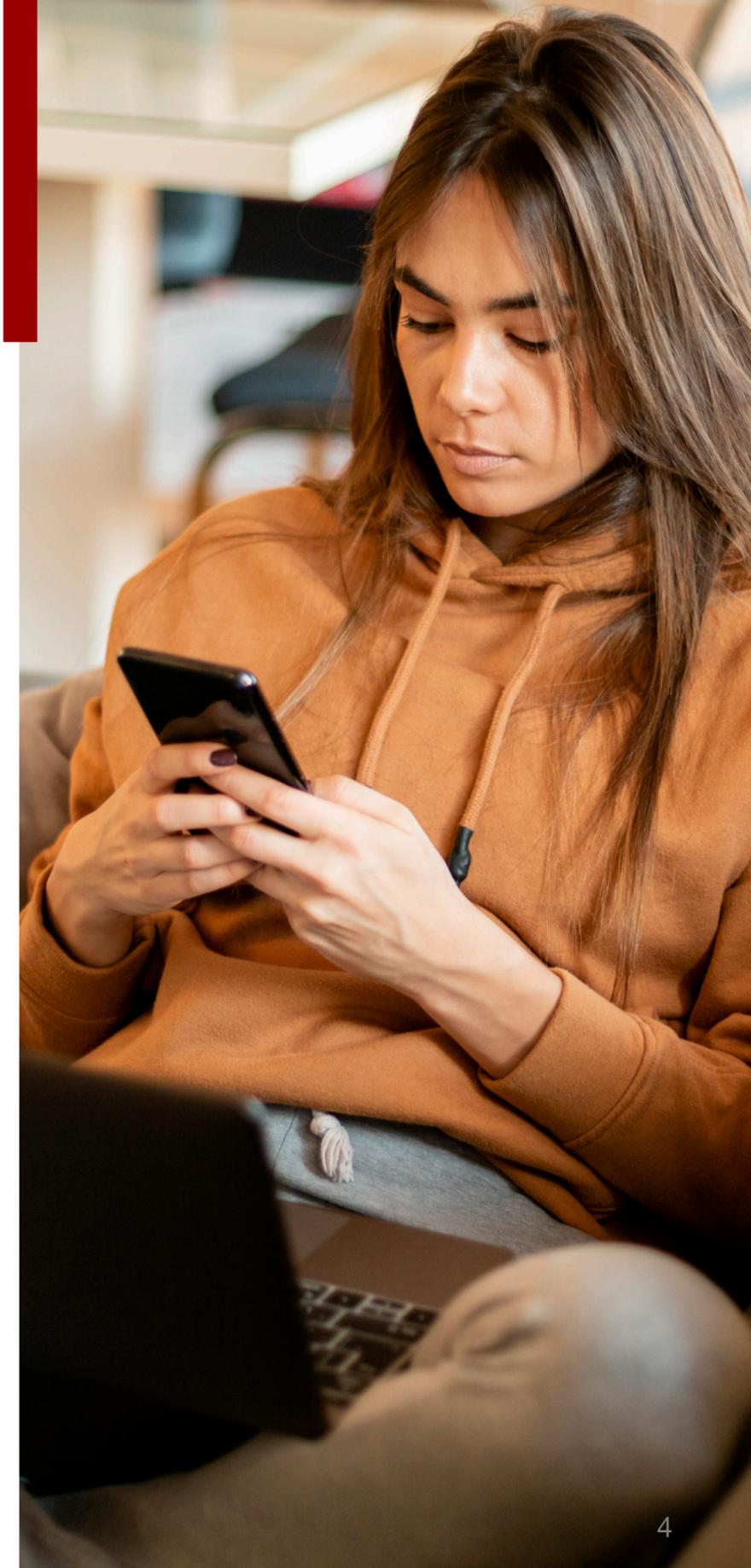


## Top 5 Conversation Struggles

Speaking up and establishing a culture of dialogue is essential to ensuring employees feel able to address and solve individual, cultural, and organizational challenges.

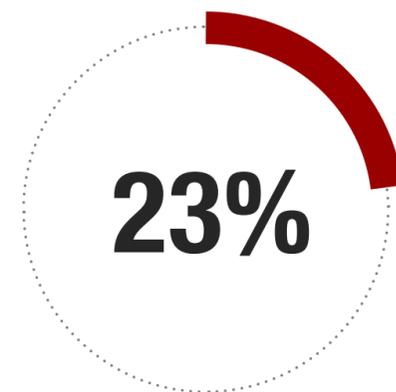
Just consider the impact and importance of the conversations people are currently avoiding in a virtual workplace. According to respondents, the top five crucial conversations they are struggling to hold with their manager or colleagues include:

1. Poor performance
2. Behavior concerns or violations
3. Perceived bias and inequities
4. Failure to meet deadlines, budgets, project specs, etc.
5. Concerns about team strategy

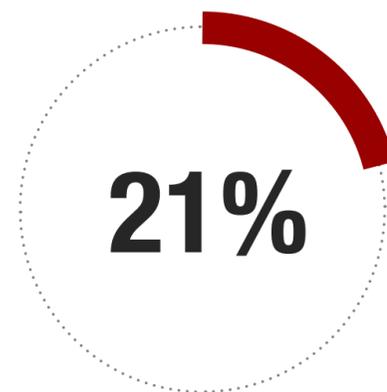


# Painful Repercussions

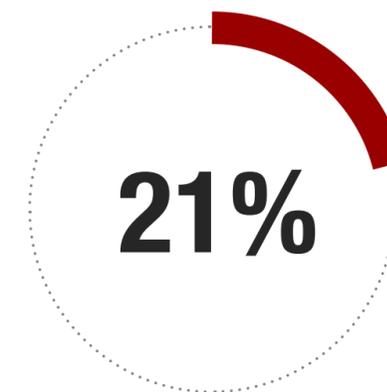
Remaining silent on these issues led to pretty harmful outcomes for both the employee and the organization, the most common being:



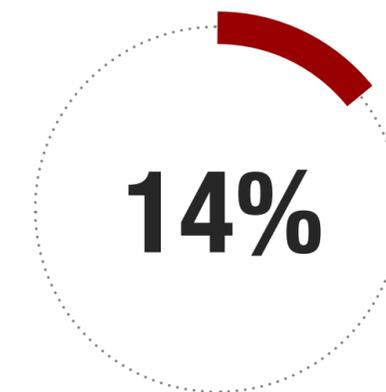
**More Stress**



**More Time-wasting**



**Lower Morale**



**Lower Productivity**

# Opening Up Dialogue

The longer it takes you and your colleagues to speak up when they see an issue or concern, the more likely those once casual conversations will transform into crucial ones.

At the core of every successful conversation lies the free flow of information. **Remote managers who can successfully foster a culture where varied opinions and open conversation are welcome will close the gap on the distance between someone seeing something and saying something.**

That's when you'll find peace instead of stress, proficiency in place of time-wasting, optimism over low morale, and productivity rather than apathy.



“The health of any relationship, team, or organization can be measured by the lag between identifying and discussing problems.”

- Joseph Grenny

# Achieving Success

What does successful open dialogue look like in the real world? Here's a sampling of comments from survey respondents on what made their remote leaders successful:

**“My manager holds a monthly checkpoint to ask people how they are feeling, asking everyone on the team to respond if they are comfortable. She talks about her situation openly and how she deals with things.”**

**“Maintains frequent face-to-face communication. Keeps people informed through email and also schedules frequent video conferences to discuss arising issues. Diligently follows up on commitment and actions plans.”**

**“Someone that is empathetic and understands your situation, but ensures productivity and that deliverables are met.”**

**“Leads weekly 1-1 meetings with each coworker and bi-weekly team meetings, always notifies us of changes and deadlines, created a weekly ‘coffee break’ meeting for informal chats with the team.”**

**“Manager gives concise, specific instructions; keeps team members advised of emerging issues; handles setbacks with equanimity; seeks feedback at every opportunity.”**

**“Always communicates what is happening around and above him. Supportive and not dismissive of comments related to stress and burnout. Always respectful, open to listen to and appreciate ideas from others in the team.”**

# 6 Tips to Hold Crucial Conversations Virtually

Now is the time to move to action and prevent distance from destroying your team's dialogue. While the fundamentals of communication may be the same whether you're speaking face-to-face or virtually, different considerations should be taken for remote conversations. Here are six great tips to do just that:

1

## **INVITE DIALOGUE**

Sometimes, all it takes to encourage a conversation is to invite it. Ask people how they are doing, what concerns they have, what you could do better to support them, etc. Don't mistake silence for contentment; often it's just the opposite.

2

## **DON'T ASSUME**

What we think is crystal clear can be understood differently or even be unknown to someone else. Make sure you get confirmation from others that they received and understand your communication.



# 3

## OVER COMMUNICATE

The more you correspond, the more you'll strengthen the relationship and the less likely misunderstandings will arise—or when they do, it'll be easier to resolve them thanks to the relationship you've already established.

# 4

## USE YOUR VOICE

Writing an email or message may sometimes be easiest, but doing so exclusively isn't enough. Face-to-face meetings or at least phone calls can help prevent misunderstandings and lend a personal touch.



# 5

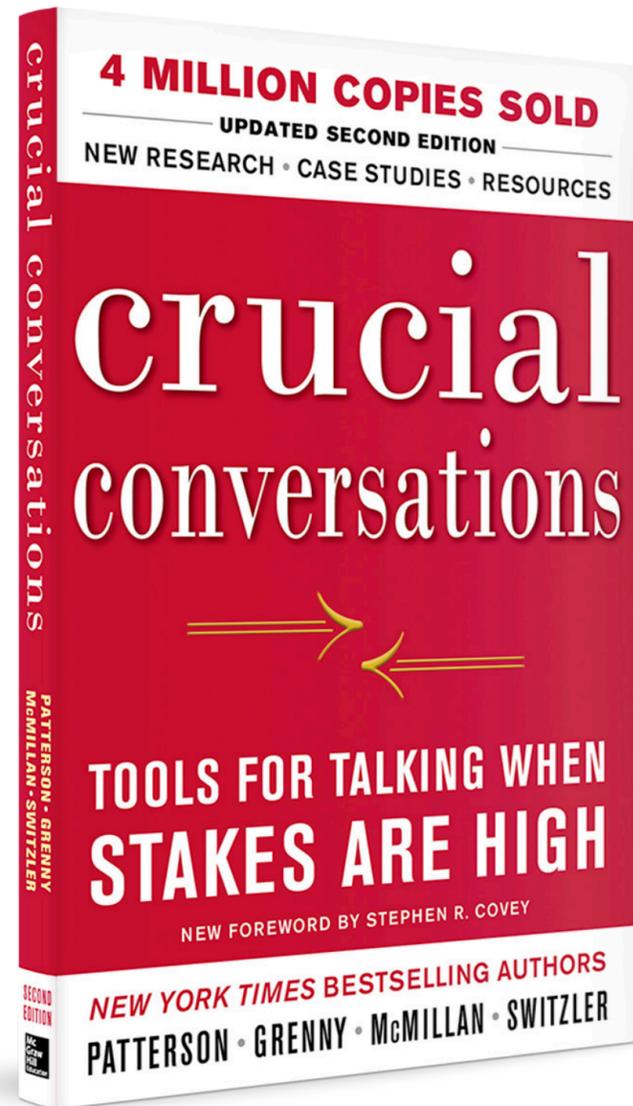
## DETERMINE WHAT YOU REALLY WANT

Before bringing up your concern, look at the long-term goal you want to achieve, not only for yourself but for the other person and the organization.

# 6

## SHOW YOU CARE

Make time during your virtual calls to have small talk and build personal connections. When speaking up about an issue, show your co-worker you care about them and their feelings and explain your motives up front.



## Skill Up to Speak Up

The tips above come from the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations* and award-winning learning experience of the same name.

Crucial Conversations teaches people how to achieve alignment and agreement when stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. With skills to speak their minds honestly and respectfully, people collaborate better, make better decisions, and foster workplace cultures of trust, safety, respect, and responsibility. The course is available in a variety of formats including on-demand, virtual, and in-person.

Learn more at [vitalsmarts.com/crucial-conversations-training](https://vitalsmarts.com/crucial-conversations-training).

# VitalSmarts®

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Named a Top 20 Leadership Training Company, VitalSmarts is home to the award-winning Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Accountability®, Getting Things Done®, The Power of Habit™, and Influencer Training® and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles. VitalSmarts has consulted with more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies and trained more than 2 million people worldwide.

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