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Overcoming the Silent Barriers

BY FRANCINE Z. CARLIN

The executive sitting opposite me looked deflated. " I don't know what else to try, " he sighed, playing with the empty sugar packet beside his untouched coffee.

Since becoming the director of a public-sector organization a year earlier, with a mandate to improve efficiency and customer service, he thought he had done everything right. He had implemented proven management strategies and held change-management workshops for staff. He had overseen the renovation of the organization's offices and the place looked great: bright, airy, and comfortable, the kind of work environment most people would love.

> ❯ Recognizing the Presence of Silent Barriers
> As a leader, have you noticed:
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> ▸ You do your best to motivate and collaborate with you direct reports, yet you are met only with apathy.
> ▸ Employees seem to wish they were elsewhere.
> ▸ Customers are complaining about bad attitudes or sloppy service.
> ▸ Improvement suggestions are often met with negative responses.
> ▸ There is no camaraderie in your workplace, or the camaraderie that does exist excludes certain people.
> ▸ A "not-my-job" attitude is stopping people from helping each other out.
> ▸ Grudges seem to fester.
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> If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, silent barriers may be undermining your organization's true potential. Recognizing the presence of silent barriers is the first step to identifying and overcoming them.

But I'd noticed a few other things. None of the staff were smiling. An employee barely looked up when a co-worker approached with a request for help. I overheard a surprisingly cold response to a customer's question. I mentioned my observations to the director — let's call him Dave — as he continued to stare at his coffee cup. "I know," he agreed. "Teamwork just seems to be a word around here. People are so disengaged; their eyes glaze over when I talk about all the great changes we've made." His shoulders slumped. "They just don't seem to care."

I have seen this kind of situation again and again, where a shiny surface masks serious issues lurking underneath. Like Dave, many organizational leaders put a lot of effort into making infrastructure and management improvements. They apply best practices and summon their most positive can-do attitudes. However, these leaders' efforts can become window dressing if they fail to identify and address the silent barriers to business success.

Silent barriers are negative attitudes and behaviours — gossip, apathy, favouritism, competitiveness, anxiety — that lead to mistrust, negative attitudes, disrespect, misunderstandings, cliques, and other counterproductive workplace situations. Most organizations simmer with these obstacles, including among the executive ranks, but rarely address them openly — to their own disadvantage. It can affect all types of businesses: family-owned businesses where long-time sibling rivalry causes operational chaos and the near demise of companies; private- and public-sector firms where gossipy lunchrooms lead to hurt feelings and a lack of cooperation; and staff, from the senior team on down, who harbour such bitterness over past events that they're unable to move forward. When unaddressed, silent barriers like these can become embedded in an organization's culture, producing serious inertia to change and undermining even the best business plans.

Silent barriers were probably at work in Dave's organization, too. "Some people might be living in the past," I suggested. Dave nodded before sharing some stories he'd heard about his autocratic predecessor. "There might also be some resentment to your approach to change," I added. Dave looked surprised, but asked. "What do you suggest we do?"

My recommendation was an established approach to help private- and public-sector organizational leaders identify silent barriers and positively address them to reach individual and business goals. Although each organization's unique needs influence program specifics, the approach usually involves four main steps:

1 › Give people the opportunity to speak their minds. Provide a private way — a one-on-one interview with a neutral party or a confidential survey — for people to express concerns about specific individuals, their needs of those people, and the things they appreciate about them. Ask for frank specifics; generalities aren't sufficient to uncover silent barriers.

In Dave's organization, interviews with him and his senior team revealed deep-seated resentments of all kinds. "Sam procrastinates." "Alice is a know-it-all." "Josie always takes advantage of situations to make herself look better." And on and on. People's entrenched opinions about each other were being used as excuses for their own negative behaviours.

2 › In a safe group setting, acknowledge the issues. First, establish a safe, respectful environment where people can collectively explore their thoughts and feelings about each other and the workplace they share, and set ground rules to ensure open and respectful discussion. Second, acknowledge the legitimacy of people's feelings. You can't undo the past, but you can move beyond, and people who feel heard are more likely to participate in finding solutions than people who feel ignored.

For Dave's group, there was a day-long dialogue to discuss the interview findings. Everyone was encouraged to suspend doubts about the process, step outside their comfort zones, and keep what was said within the room. The unattributed statements people had made in the interviews were reviewed and each person was allowed to absorb the findings and talk about the concerns and appreciation others had expressed about them. As the day progressed and emotions ebbed and flowed, a number of breakthroughs occurred. "I feel like the negative vapours are disappearing," one participant said.

"This was a tough but good session; I think it has brought us closer," another offered. Dave, hearing that people felt he was presumptuous and overly aggressive with the amount of change he'd introduced so quickly, said, "It's not easy to receive feedback, but I'm committed to being more visible and transparent with my decisions."

3 › Once the silent barriers are identified and acknowledged, develop a concrete action plan for moving past them. Uncovering silent barriers can be an emotional journey, but the end result isn't a group hug where everyone just agrees to get along. Once the issues constraining business success have been identified and addressed, leaders then can move more effectively to develop practical, tangible ways to ensure those issues don't continue to get in the way.

At the end of the session, Dave and his group agreed to some specific action items, as well as some senior team ground rules. No gossip. Be open and present at meetings. Even if someone disagrees with a group decision, they should still uphold it. Express issues respectfully and honestly as they occur as opposed to allowing things to fester.

The ground rules sound simple, but they hadn't been followed before and were directly related to the silent barriers the group had uncovered.

4 › As a group, revisit the action plan at regular intervals. Staving off silent barriers is an ongoing process not a one-time fix. It takes commitment and practice to adopt new behaviours. Routine tune-up sessions reinforce the actions that are working and amend those that are not. It also allows new silent barriers to be acknowledged and addressed.

Three months after the initial process was facilitated at Dave's office, the first of what became a semi-annual tune-up meeting was held. While little had changed on the surface, now the energy in the room matched the engaging environment. People seemed more relaxed and welcoming. Many were smiling.

As the senior group gathered for the session, Dave talked about a new program the organization was preparing to launch. The two senior team members who had been most dismissive of change were in charge of it, and it sounded like they were doing an outstanding job. Though they still tussled over turf sometimes, staff were open and professional about it and no longer tried to get others to take one side or the other.

"What we learned about silent barriers has transformed our entire leadership team," Dave said. "Once people in this organization — including me — became aware of the barriers and began to address them constructively, we became a higher functioning group. There's a completely new level of trust, respect, and excitement around here that is finally producing the results we've been looking for."

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