



# The Cost of the Conversation Gap on Workplace Health

New research shows that certain employee groups avoid tough conversations at higher rates than others—wreaking havoc on engagement, productivity, company culture, and the bottom line.

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on Workplace Health



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# Executive summary



In 2009, the authors of *Crucial Conversations* published a seminal study about communication in the workplace. They had set out to understand why people were avoiding crucial conversations with their colleagues and what happened when they did—and their findings painted a stark picture of professional life.

More than 70% of employees were failing to confront dialogue with their peers, managers, and direct reports, they reported<sup>1</sup>. Of those people, 34% admitted to staying silent for more than a month, while 25% said they kept quiet for more than a year. The result? Decreased engagement, lost productivity, and increased turnover—all of which was costing companies and damaging their culture.

At Bravely, we call this the Conversation Gap—and we were curious if it had narrowed in the decade since Joseph Grenny and David Maxfield's report. So we partnered with an independent research firm to conduct our own survey, interviewing 500+ full-time employees across the country, and diving deep into the things they talk about (or don't) on the job.

<sup>1</sup>VitalSmarts, *Employees Fear Crucial Conversations*

What we learned? Despite the increased emphasis on workplace culture and the billions of dollars that have poured into HR departments and initiatives, the number of employees avoiding tough conversation hasn't budged. And what's more, the fear of speaking up doesn't discriminate: regardless of title, tenure, company size, identity, or industry, people are avoiding conversations about everything from coworker conflict to performance-related stress.

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## About Bravely

Bravely is a new kind of benefit in support of workplace health. We connect employees with professional coaches for confidential conversations in the moments they need it most.

## Facts about the Conversation Gap

Despite increased emphasis on HR platforms and programs, people still aren't going forward

Conversations are failing at a higher rate at large companies

Managers struggle to speak up at the same rate as their direct reports, causing ripple effects downstream

LGBTQ+ employees fear retribution more than others



# Research approach

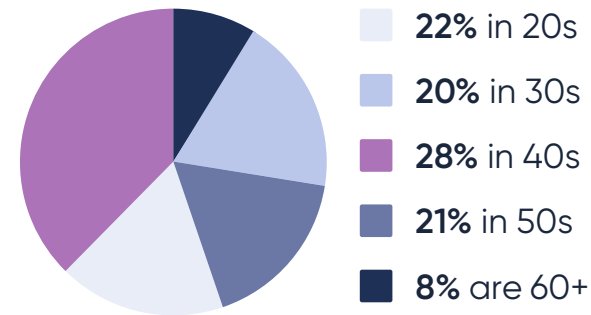
## Our research approach

Analyzing demographic and firmographic identity to quantify the Conversation Gap's impact on different employee groups

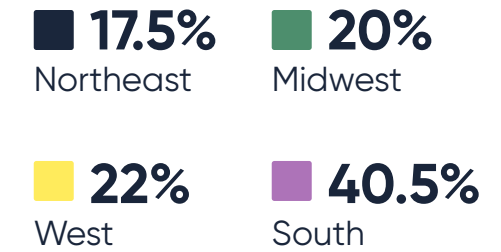
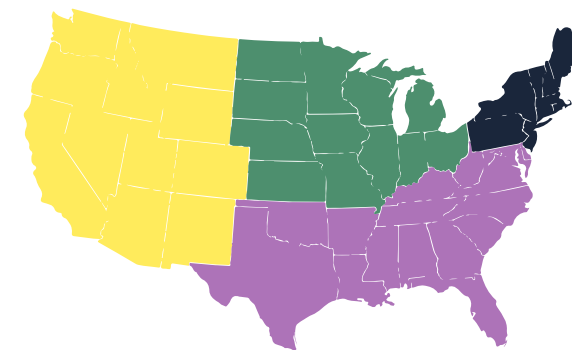
We partnered with an independent research firm to survey more than 500 full-time employees working in office jobs across the United States. We spoke to employees at large companies and small companies, at startups and enterprise organizations, and at every stage of their careers.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

### AGE



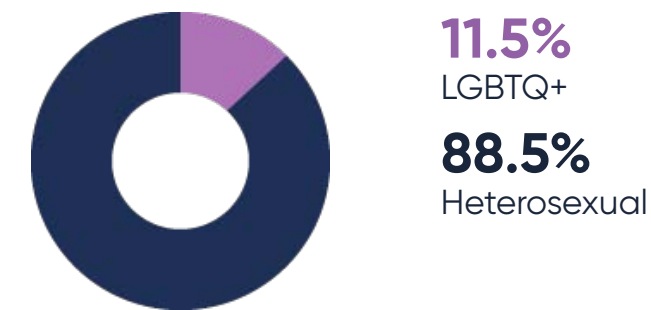
### GEOGRAPHY



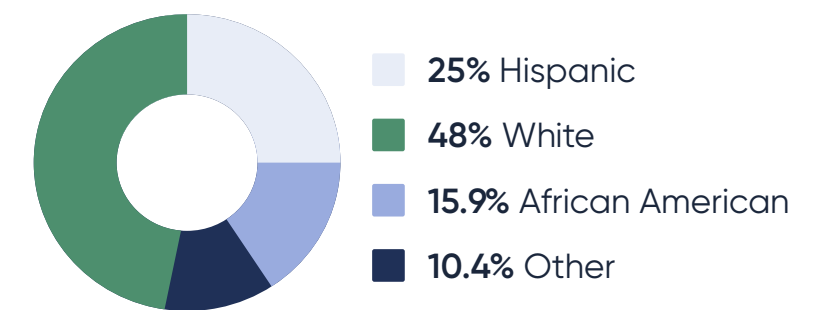
### GENDER IDENTITY



### IDENTIFIES AS LGBT+

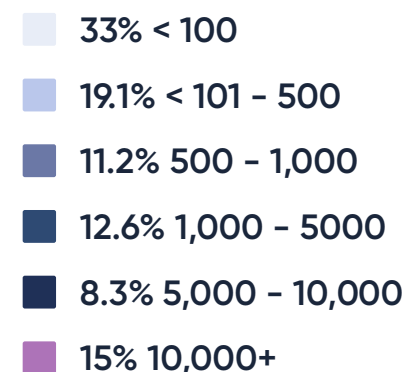
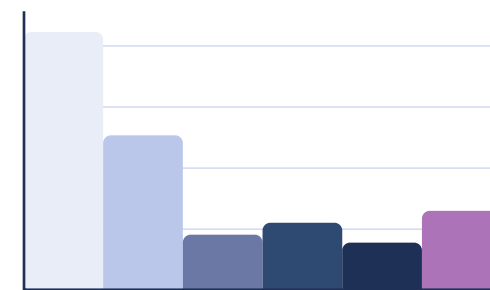


### RACE

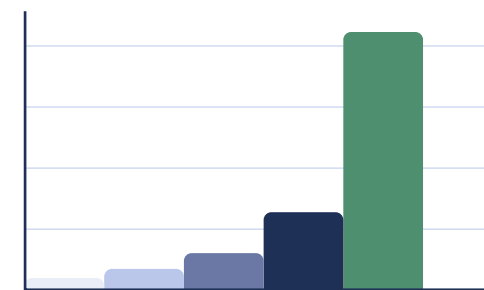


## FIRMOGRAPHICS

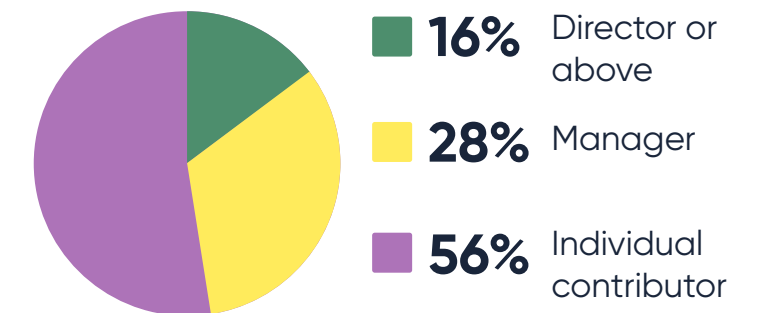
### COMPANY SIZE By no of employees



### TENURE IN CURRENT JOB By years



### LEVEL OF SENIORITY



Company type

**16.7%** say they work for a startup

# About Bravely



**At Bravely, we connect employees with professional coaches for confidential conversations in the moments they need it most. Employees can use our platform to book a session and talk about whatever's on their mind—whether they're stressed about an upcoming performance review, looking to develop new skills, or in need of guidance around something more serious, like unfair treatment.**

If you've spent any time in the workplace, you can probably think back to a situation that you avoided bringing up because it felt easier to stay quiet. You can also probably remember what happened after that: your attitude likely started to suffer, you became less engaged and productive, you started gossiping with a coworker (causing toxicity to ripple through your team), and you may have even started to look for a new job. The longer you avoided the conversation, the bigger your issue grew.

This vicious cycle is exactly what inspired us to start Bravely in 2017. (In fact, our founder actually came up with the idea after a friend called him to vent about a coworker conflict that had left her feeling like all she could do was quit.) Our goal is to get employees speaking sooner, more openly, and more often about the things that are holding them back from success—helping prepare them for conversations with their managers, colleagues, direct reports, or HR teams, and giving them the confidence and action plan that they need to go forward.

**Plain and simple: employees who talk about their issues are happier and healthier. When employees are happy and healthy, company culture thrives and revenue grows. When they aren't, it doesn't.**



# Part I

## History of the Conversation Gap



decade ago, leadership development experts Joseph Grenny and David Maxfield published a study capturing the communication breakdowns that were taking place at work. They found that more than 70% of U.S. employees were avoiding a difficult conversation with their manager, colleagues, or direct reports—and growing less productive and more likely to leave as a result.

**At Bravely, we call this the Conversation Gap: and we believe it's one of the biggest and most expensive issues facing company leaders today. For that reason, we've spent a lot of time studying its impact on the workplace.**

Since 2009, the HR landscape has evolved in attempt to address these issues as the media and conference circuit has turned its attention to the employee experience. People leaders increasingly have a seat at the table. Companies are pouring billions of dollars into programs in support of learning and development, performance management, culture analytics, and more. Investing in diversity and inclusion is no longer the “right thing to do”—it's a driver of company performance. And HR platforms have become an integral and permanent part of organizations' technology stacks.

Given this increased investment and the spotlight that continues to shine on workplace culture, we were interested in understanding whether the gap had widened or narrowed since Grenny and Maxfield's initial report.

### HR spend in 2017

**\$200 billion**  
on personnel

**\$70 billion**  
on learning and  
development

**\$8 billion**  
on diversity and inclusion

**\$10 billion**  
on tech solutions



# Part II

## The Conversation Gap in 2019

To understand how the Conversation Gap had evolved, we surveyed more than 500 full-time employees across the country—managers, individual contributors, people at startups, people at large enterprises, and everyone in between.

**We found that seven in 10 people were avoiding tough conversations in the workplace—just like what was reported in 2009.**

Their reasoning? Fear of retribution or the perception that going forward would be futile. Forty-five percent of respondents said they chose to stay silent because they feared that speaking up might make the situation worse. And 46% said that they didn't believe speaking up would do anything to change the situation based on their opinions of company leadership and their experiences at past jobs.

What's more, respondents told us that the benefits that companies have brought on to close this gap—manager trainings, diversity and inclusion programs, mentorship initiatives, flexibility policies—had little to no impact on their likelihood to speak up. Sixty percent of people who said they had access to these programs still admitted to avoiding tough conversations, suggesting that they failed to emphasize communication skill-building in a meaningful way.

Our research also illustrated that when employees failed to confront their situation head-on, they often took their complaints (and negative attitude) elsewhere. People who admitted to staying silent were 8x more likely to post a negative review of their company on an anonymous review site like Glassdoor, damaging employer brand, and 12x more likely to complain to colleagues—spreading negative sentiment and toxicity.

Finally, we learned that the Conversation Gap was indeed wider for certain employee groups. In the next section, we'll break this down in detail.



## What kinds of employees are staying silent?



To understand how wide the Conversation Gap was among different employee groups, we focused on both demographic and firmographic identity.

### Employees at startups and large enterprises

Unsurprisingly, we found that the Conversation Gap is widest at the largest (read: most matrixed) and smallest (read: fast-growing startup) companies. Of those surveyed, 77% of people working at startups and 78% of people working at organizations with more than 10,000 employees said they were avoiding tough conversations, compared to 60.5% of people working at medium-size companies.

These responses are likely attributed to a variety of factors. In high growth environments, roles and responsibilities are often ill-defined as the company grows, pivots, and changes on an almost constant basis. (These organizations also often lack a dedicated HR or People function, especially in the early days.) And at large enterprise organizations, distributed and matrixed teams can make regular communication seem difficult and overwhelming.

At Bravely, our coaches speak to employees at both ends of the spectrum—and in both cases, they often find that the lack of a clear path leads to increased conversation avoidance.

<sup>2</sup>JobVite, 2018 Job Seeker Nation Study

<sup>3</sup>Deloitte, Deloitte Millennial Survey

<sup>4</sup>SHRM and Globoforce, Employee Recognition Survey



“In big organizations, which often lack transparency around personnel decisions, and at smaller startups, which can have a hard time establishing clear roles and responsibilities, employees don’t always know what’s next or how to get there,” says our Head Pro Maureen Kennedy. “Many of our sessions are the result of an employee not seeing a clear path but not knowing how to approach their manager about it.”





## Employees who manage people—and employees who don't

According to SHRM and Globoforce, a staggering 93% of managers feel like they lack the training needed to effectively coach their direct reports.<sup>4</sup> The result? Individual contributors lack guidance and direction beyond their day-to-day tasks. “Historically, leadership meant having more information and more facts than your subordinates,” writes famous management consultant Dr. Gary Hamel. “Today, people expect a very different set of traits from their leaders. They want people who are great mentors.”

Our research paints a similar picture—suggesting that seniority is not always a difference-maker when it comes to communication. We found that 68% of managers and 65% of individual contributors were avoiding tough conversations, especially around things like giving feedback and “influencing up.” Additionally, we discovered that 94% of managers who leave their jobs due to strained relationships with their direct reports admit to have evaded this dialogue, especially when it comes to giving feedback.

At Bravely, our coaches see this reflected in the issues people share.



**“Employees don't want to manage up, and managers don't want to give tough feedback, because both situations are perceived as awkward and difficult,” Kennedy says. “If the manager-employee relationship was discussed more openly as a two-way relationship, and both managers and individual contributors were taught how to communicate and set expectations, teams would run a lot more smoothly.”**

## Employees who have spent 1-2 years at their company

We've all seen the headlines about new hires and flight risk. Last year, JobVite reported that 30% of employees will leave their jobs within the first 90 days<sup>2</sup>, citing mismanaged expectations, bad experiences, and company culture as a result.

Interestingly enough, however, our research shows that people who have spent 1-2 years at their current company are avoiding conversations at a higher rate than those new hires—suggesting that the three-month mark isn't the only key inflection point in an employee's lifecycle. These responses are supported by Deloitte: in a survey<sup>3</sup> of 10,455 workers ages 22 to 36, they found that 43% of people planned to leave their current job within two years.



## Employees who identify as LGBTQ+

Despite the increased emphasis that has been placed on inclusive workplace policies, 70% of people who identify as LGBTQ+ say that they're afraid to bring their full selves to work, according to the Human Rights Campaign. There are a number of factors fueling this statistic, not the least of which is the hiring process: according to National Public Radio, 20% of these employees have experienced discrimination when applying for a job.<sup>5</sup>

When looking into the Conversation Gap's impact on the LGBTQ+ community, we found that an overwhelming 80% were avoiding this dialogue due to negative experiences at past and current jobs—a reminder that company leaders are contending with employees' past personal experiences. Interestingly, we also found that half of all employees surveyed were unfamiliar with their company's D&I initiatives, or unsure about their existence in the first place.

<sup>5</sup>Catalyst, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Workplace Issues

# Part IV

## What about HR?



While our research shows that HR has a better reputation than the media suggests—60% of respondents said they had an HRBP that they felt comfortable speaking to—the truth is that people simply aren't taking advantage of their HR teams.

We found that only 19% of people go to HR when they have an issue, even when they haven't been able to resolve or improve their situation with their manager. Additionally, employees working at companies with HR departments were 5% more likely to be avoiding a tough conversation than employees without them.

At Bravely, our coaches have heard these same sentiments shared by employees.



“People seem to think that HR exists to ‘put out fires’ as opposed to helping them work through issues productively,” Kennedy says. It’s a theme we see often: people don’t know when or why they should go to their HR Business Partners, so they’re not taking full advantage of them.”

## How coaching can help



We have seen that just-in-time coaching is one of the best ways to close the Conversation Gap because it provides employees with a neutral, unbiased, and totally safe space for talking about the things that they've been avoiding. Because our coaches work outside the walls of their office, they're able to provide guidance from a place of objectivity; employees, on the other hand, can feel comfortable being honest without fear of retribution.

The proof? According to our post-session surveys, employees are 85% more likely to approach a difficult conversation after speaking with their coach. Additionally, 91% say they wouldn't have gone forward to HR if they hadn't gone to Bravely first—and 60% say they feel more positive about their future at their company after their session.

In conclusion: while coaching certainly won't abolish the Conversation Gap, it can provide people with the confidence and clarity they need to go forward, and the skills they need to start developing stronger communication habits. Over time, these habits lead to behavior change—resulting in employees that go forward more often and more productively when they have issues that are impacting their workplace health.



“I could tell right away that [my Pro] knew exactly what was describing and was able to pick up on the dynamics of my work situation. He provided really helpful, actionable steps for my next meeting. I feel empowered going into my next review.”

Employee testimonial



# Contact and sources

More than 70% of employees were failing to confront dialogue with their peers, managers, and direct reports.

**VitalSmarts**, [Employees Fear Crucial Conversations](#)

30% of employees will leave their jobs within the first 90 days.

**JobVite**, [2018 Job Seeker Nation Study](#)

43% of people plan to leave their current job within two years.

**Deloitte**, [Deloitte Millennial Survey](#)

93% of managers feel like they lack the training needed to coach their direct reports.

**SHRM and Globoforce**, [Employee Recognition Survey](#)

20% of employees have experienced discrimination when applying for a job.

**Catalyst**, [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Workplace Issues](#)



To learn more about how Bravely can close the Conversation Gap in your organization, visit [www.workbravely.com](http://www.workbravely.com).