



# Courage in The Lucky Country—a Perspective on Australian Organisations

by Dina Pozzo

## Workplace Conversations

**269** Australian participants responded to insium's Workplace Courage Questionnaire (wCQ)\*. When asked to provide their own definition of workplace courage, 10% of respondents mentioned that courage involved having a tough conversation or difficult discussion.

Respondent definitions included:

"Being able to voice your views in a way that enables influence or change rather than disables it."

"Voicing concerns even when no-one will; being strong in the face of adversity."

"Having open and honest discussions even when they may be difficult."

"Having difficult conversations with both staff reporting to you and with directors."

This article will focus on the results—analysed in partnership with Wavemaker Australia—of those situations associated with Workplace Conversations, with accompanying discussion and conclusions. Overall results for Workplace Conversations can be found in the graph in Appendix 3.

## Workplace Conversations

**A**uthor and University of Huston Professor Brené Brown's research with c-suite leaders identified that honest, productive conversations—including giving feedback—result in clarity, trust and engagement, and constructive behaviour. Edgar Schein's work emphasises that humble inquiry—that is, genuine curiosity and interest—makes available a wealth of information; increases understanding; expands and enriches judgement, and improves behaviour. Google's Project Aristotle identified that clarity of roles, plans and goals make up one of the five dynamics of a successful team. This is supported by Patrick

\* Further information about insium's wCQ, including methodology and breakdown of demographics can be found in Appendices 1 and 2, respectively. The workplace situations within Workplace Conversations can be found in Appendix 3.



Lencioni's work, which highlights the fact that high performing teams hold each other to account specifically by providing feedback on performance and behaviours, thereby enabling the achievement of individual and team goals and objectives. The common thread in the work of these scholars and practitioners is the importance and impact of workplace conversations on individual, team and organisational performance.

The insium Workplace Courage Questionnaire has identified that, for our respondents, the three most worthwhile workplace conversations are:

1. Managing customer expectations (96%)
2. Speaking up against unsafe work practices (95%), and
3. Speaking up in the presence of workplace bullying (92%)

Participants also responded that these are the three workplace conversations that they are most likely to act on (90%, 93% and 78%, respectively).

### Three workplace conversations that need attention

Although having a difficult conversation, delivering a difficult message regarding workplace change, and giving feedback to a more senior colleague are considered only slightly to moderately risky (36%, 36% and 46%,

respectively), this risk has impact on willingness to act. One in three respondents will not have a difficult workplace conversation, one in four will not deliver a difficult message regarding workplace change, and one in two will not give feedback to a more senior colleague—even though each of these conversations are considered highly worthwhile (87%, 84% and 71%, respectively).

Let's break this down further<sup>†</sup>. Senior leaders are more willing to have a difficult conversation and to deliver difficult messages regarding workplace changes than both first line managers (FLMs) and team members. This may be due to the responsibility that comes with their seniority, their expertise and skill development in these areas, or perhaps tenure in a senior role.

A few points to note for their employees:

- It is important that team members are provided with the skills and an environment where they feel psychologically safe to have a difficult conversation, regardless of who they are speaking to; team members may be more aware of internal issues within the team or of processes that are not working, which will go unnoticed if they don't feel they can have a difficult conversation
- It is important that senior leaders ensure that FLMs understand their

<sup>†</sup> Refer Table 1: Willingness to Act in Appendix 4.



own responses to change, and are aligned, committed and comfortable delivering difficult messages about workplace change

Interestingly; regardless of role responsibility, tenure, expertise or skill development, the willingness to act on giving feedback to a senior colleague is relatively consistent amongst senior leaders, FLMs and team members (56%, 43% and 40%, respectively). Approximately one in two are not willing to provide feedback to a senior colleague regardless of their own seniority or otherwise. Of these three specific workplace conversations, giving feedback to a senior colleague is deemed as being most risky.

This finding—a lack of willingness to give feedback to a more senior colleague—is okay if:

- You do not want to promote personal and professional growth
- Your organisation does not want to grow and/or does want a decline in growth
- A fixed mindset is what you have or are striving for
- Your organisation does not promote increasing self-awareness
- Our more senior colleagues never need feedback

Three workplace conversations that need attention:

1. Having a difficult conversation
2. Delivering a difficult message regarding workplace change
3. Giving feedback to a more senior colleague

## Disagreeing with others

Three in five respondents are willing to disagree with an idea, with one in three considering it risky and only two in three respondents considering it worthwhile.

One of the five behaviours of a high performing team, as identified by Patrick Lencioni, is mastering productive conflict; and within that, specifically “*team members voice their opinions at the risk of causing disagreement*”. To be able to do so, teams need to identify the ideal conflict point. What is your organisation’s view on productive conflict? Do you seek differing opinions, encourage others to voice their opinions and to deal with issues as they arise?

In the absence of productive conflict—that is, in the presence of

While approximately two in three Senior Leaders and FLMs will disagree with an idea (65% and 62%, respectively), willingness to disagree with an idea decreases to 43% for a team member. What impact does status associated with leadership and position, knowingly or unknowingly, have on team members?

destructive conflict—personal attacks thrive, controversial topics are ignored, time and energy is wasted with posturing and interpersonal risk management, and



engagement decreases; as does innovation.

While exploring disagreements; only 40% of respondents will disagree with a customer, with only 38% considering the action worthwhile; risk is considered to be moderate (49%). This is particularly curious given that 96% of respondents consider managing customer expectations to be worthwhile, with 90% willing to act on customer expectations. Do your customer-facing employees know exactly what their customer expectations are?

What does this mean in today's world where customer-facing employees are being asked, by customers, to be genuinely curious about their business and to be more courageous by challenging them? Genuine curiosity includes asking insightful questions, which may highlight information that the customer is unaware of. The courageous challenge may be to share information that is contradictory to what the customer has and knows. This is not a surprising situation when you consider the speed with which knowledge and information is produced, changes or becomes redundant.

What does this mean for service organisations who encourage their sales representatives to be bold in their interactions with their customers? Or for organisations who genuinely espouse a consultative or

partnership approach with their customers, but are too fearful to disagree? What is the cost to your organisation—and to your customer—of this behaviour? Whilst being out-dated, do your customer-facing employees still believe that the customer is always right?

A few more observations

**Whistleblowing** is considered the most risky (65%) workplace conversation to have, but one in two respondents are still willing to take action if required (52%). Women (70%) consider the risk to be greater than men (54%). Team members consider this conversation to carry greater risk (79%) compared to FLMs (61%) and Senior Leaders (56%). As this is considered to be a highly worthwhile action (80%), organisations need to provide clear guidelines so that the risks to employees are lowered and there are fewer concerns about possible repercussions.

Similarly, **speaking up in the presence of workplace bullying** is considered to be high worth (92%) and with moderate risk (42%), yet only 78% of respondents are willing to speak up. Willingness to speak up decreases by almost 20% for team members compared to senior leaders. Does your organisation have a targeted program for recognising workplace bullying and how to handle this situation?

Two in three respondents will not ask for a **pay increase** even though risk



is low overall (26%). Let's break this down further. Team members find this the highest risk (42%) compared with FLMs and Senior Leaders (22% and 16% respectively). What does this mean for your organisation if your team members are reluctant to voice their salary concerns and are then offered greater remuneration for a similar role in another organisation? How clear are your organisation's policies regarding career progression and financial reward?

The perceived worth of asking for a pay increase differs by 18% between 25-44 year old employees (73%) and 45-64 year old employees (55%). A recent LinkedIn study found that just under one in two baby boomers (44%) believe their age is the main reason for employers rejecting their job applications—are older people more concerned about keeping their jobs than risk losing them by asking for an increase in salary? (Black, 2020)

This survey found no gender skews with respect to asking for a pay rise. 35% of employee regardless of gender will take action. Males and females are just as reluctant as each other to ask for a pay increase.

some or many of your staff. Whether it's perceived or real, the risk associated with having a difficult conversation, with providing feedback and with delivering difficult messages is stopping people from having these conversations. Brené Brown's research shows that the costs of the lack of these conversations are problematic behaviours and cultural norms that destroy trust and courage.

Brown's research also shows that building courage will enable these conversations; specifically, focusing on the key skills of vulnerability, living our values, trust and learning to rise. insium has the knowledge and expertise to help you build each of these skills; to build courageous individuals, teams and organisations. What are you waiting for?

Look out for further upcoming results from insium's Workplace Courage Questionnaire. Results for insium's wCQ, Authentic Self can be found [here](#).

## The courage to have (difficult) workplace conversations

**S**ome workplace conversations may prove difficult and tough for



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About the author:

Dina Pozzo is the Founder and a Director of insium Pty Ltd. Her purpose is to open doors. She invites you to courageously open your own doors and explore and honour what is on the other side.



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## **Appendix 1. insium's Workplace Courage Questionnaire (wCQ)**

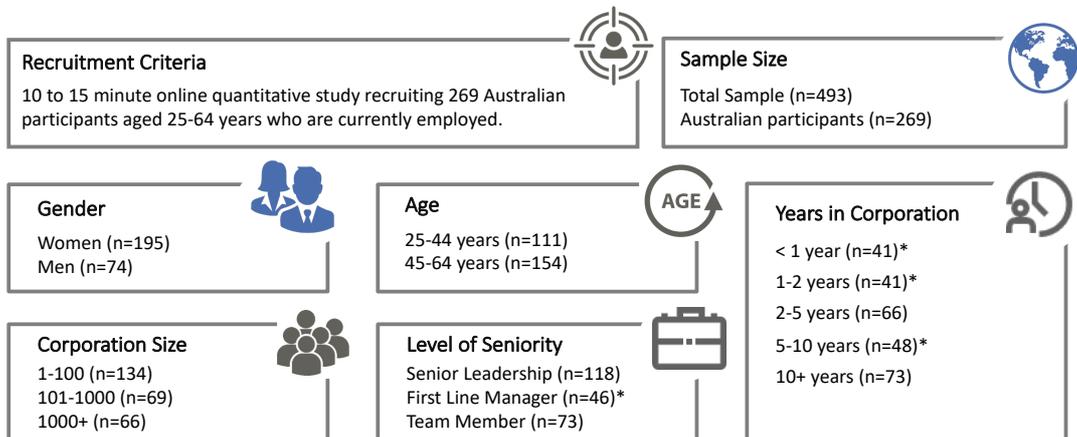
insium's Workplace Courage Questionnaire (wCQ) invited respondents to assess 38 workplace situations such as giving feedback, developing employees, holding others to account, asking for a pay rise and more. For each workplace situation, participants were asked to assess the extent to which acting on the situation was worthwhile; the risk associated with taking action; and subsequently, how willing they were to take action.

The 38 workplace situations were grouped into 5 categories:

1. Authentic self
2. Workplace conversations
3. Accountability & responsibility
4. Career development
5. Workplace culture



## Appendix 2. Methodology and Demographics:

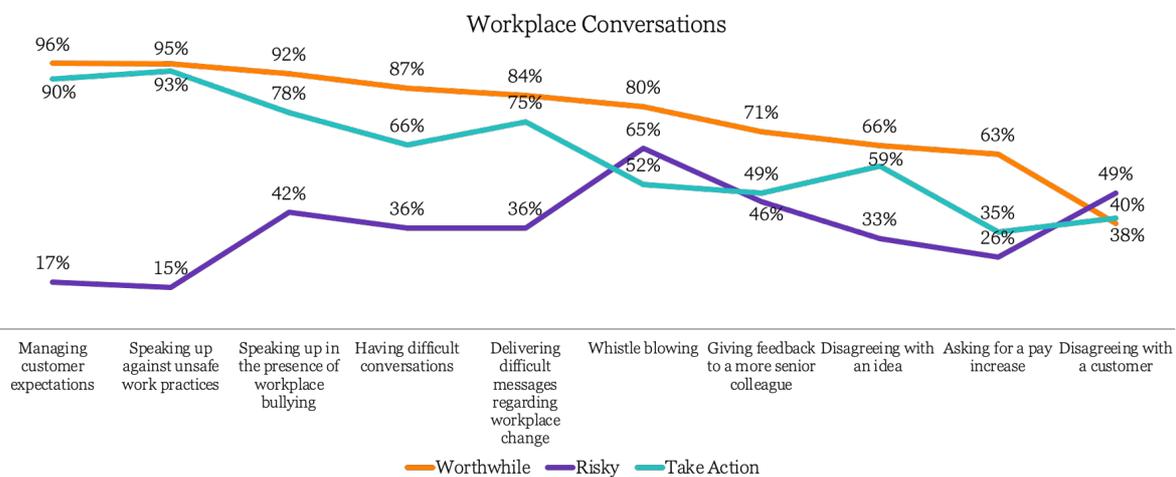


Note: Senior Leadership = Senior Leaders & Management and C-Suite; Excluded from the analysis are 18-24 years and 65+ years due to small sample size <10  
\*=sample size below 50 respondents



### Appendix 3. Workplace Situations: Workplace Conversations

- Speaking up in the presence of workplace bullying
- Having difficult conversations
- Disagreeing with a customer
- Giving feedback to a more senior colleague
- Disagreeing with an idea
- Asking for a pay increase
- Delivering difficult messages regarding workplace change
- Speaking up against unsafe work practices
- Whistle blowing
- Whistle blowing
- Managing customer expectations





#### Appendix 4.

Table 1. Willingness to act. (Senior Leadership = Senior Leaders & Management and C-Suite)

	Senior Leader	First Line Manager	Team Member
Difficult conversation	80%	67%	42%
Difficult message regarding workplace change	83%	76%	58%
Give feedback to senior colleague	56%	43%	40%



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