

Why Work Is Lonely

by Gianpiero Petriglieri

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There is an old cartoon I often show to the managers I work with. It portrays a smiling executive team around a long table. The chairman is asking, “All in favor?” Everyone’s hand is up. Meanwhile, the cloud hovering above each head contains a dissonant view: “You’ve got to be kidding;” “Heaven forbid;” “Perish the thought.” It never fails to provoke awkward laughter of self-recognition.

I have a name for this cocktail of deference, conformity and passive aggression that chokes people and teams. I call it violent politeness.

I have witnessed it countless times. After some discussion, often labeled “brainstorming,” a group will go along with the most innocuous suggestion and follow it halfheartedly, keeping itself busy to avoid admitting what everyone knows: it is not going to work.

When I probe junior managers about this dynamic, they usually explain that their caution reflects their uncertain status. It feels too risky to raise misgivings, especially if one cannot offer an alternative course of action. It might make them look clueless or disruptive to their boss or colleagues.

Early in my career, I was sympathetic to that analysis. I knew it all too well, the fear of being myself at work—or more precisely, the uncertainty about which self to be.

I thought, and advised reassuringly, that things would improve with time. As young managers became established, they would have more latitude to put their mark on the roles they took—and so would I. It would be easier to find and speak with our own voice.

It took me a few years to realize that I was offering a wishful lie. Time does not summon courage. It only morphs the fear of speaking truth to power into the fear of speaking truth in power. Once I began working with senior executives, I found those hesitations all still there, only stronger in the face of increased visibility and pressure.

Owning one's defiance feels risky at every (st)age. Speaking up feels even more exposing and consequential, spontaneity more unfamiliar, when we've spent much of our careers learning to modulate our silence—and being rewarded for it.

This is why violent politeness often gets stronger the closer one gets to the C-suite. In too many organizations, in too many of our minds, it is still what gets you there.

It is different from “groupthink.” It is not always borne of convenience, cowardice and backside-covering—or evidence of a lack of commitment or malicious intent.

As a personal habit, we often justify it with the wish not to embarrass others or to appear supportive. As a group norm, we reinforce it by endorsing “constructive” cultures that denigrate dissent as a lesser form of participation than enthusiasm.

Violent politeness is such an ingrained custom that we keep making excuses.

We keep forgetting that our closest relationships are not those where tension is glossed over but those where it can be aired and worked through safely enough.

We keep telling ourselves that speaking up is costly and ignoring the price of silence. Perhaps because the price of speaking up—being ignored, judged, labeled a poor team player or worse—is paid immediately and by those who speak first. The price of silence, on the other hand, is exacted later and paid by the group—when the bubble of false harmony bursts, relationships crumble or projects fail.

We keep ignoring that by censoring ourselves in order not to appear vulnerable, we are often complicit in being misunderstood. Silence is easy to fill with suspicions and assumptions about what others do not know about us.

We keep fooling ourselves that we need to wait and time will make us more open, as if time alone did anything more than harden tentativeness into superficiality. And in the meantime, violent politeness corrodes collaboration, problem solving and decision-making. It kills enthusiasm and drags learning to a halt.

We cast it carelessly, this stone that kills two birds we claim to cherish—our voice and our relationships. And when we have done it long enough that we have lost hope to speak or hear the truth, to truly care and be cared for, we tell ourselves...

It's lonely at the top.

Of course it is, and not just there. It's lonely everywhere you feel that you must give up your voice to stay in the room. It's lonely everywhere relationships are brittle.

Violent politeness is tied to loneliness in a vicious cycle. Once you tolerate the former you worsen the latter, and vice versa. Neither is a property of “the top,” a necessary evil, or, worse, a badge of honor.

They are choices.

They are choices to keep commitments often made unconsciously, early on and far from any top. Commitments to look strong, caring, and in control. Commitments to keep our groups looking harmonious. Commitments we care so much about keeping that we are prepared to sacrifice learning, effectiveness, freedom, and intimacy.

It is to honor these commitments that we betray ourselves as much as others.

When I show that cartoon, most managers readily recognize themselves in the self-censoring team members pretending to agree. Few identify first with the meeting’s chairperson. No wonder. When I ask them to do so and guess how they would feel, the laughter usually stops.

Lonely, is the most common answer. Burdened, blinded, mistrusted, clueless, are frequent answers too.

Violent politeness keeps leaders stuck in the very place we say we least want leaders to be—carrying the glory if things go well and the blame if they don’t. Stressed out, alone, and handsomely rewarded for it.

Some argue that we unconsciously like it that way. Because applauding or rejecting leaders feels easier than sharing the burden of leading. Because isolation feels safer than admitting doubt or asking for help. Because at one time or other we have all been hurt by leaders who ignored us or took our dissent as an attack and retaliated.

All that may be true. But most of all we do it to keep bolstering airbrushed images of leadership and teamwork—at the expense of the messier work both take.

We can’t break violent politeness or end loneliness at the top, or anywhere else, until we are ready to sacrifice those idealized images and stop hiding in plain view. It is a tiny step that takes a lot of courage. The courage to take our work seriously and ourselves less so. The courage to be both vulnerable and generous—and to stop outsourcing shame to those who can’t afford to hide.

‘The top,’ in that way, is no different than anywhere else. We need good friends to thrive and be ourselves. Real friends, that is. The kind who would rather be ruthlessly honest than violently polite.

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DANIELA WEISS 2 years ago

Gianpiero, thank you for this great article! In my opinion, the underlying problem is the inauthenticity of our leadership. There are no strong leaders anymore, women and men who are willing to get involved and engaged with all parts of the business. Most are afraid to make decisions and from there everything else stems. What's more, and in addition to the problems you are pointing out, in fact as a consequence thereof, is the level of toxicity within organisations, the gossiping and the never resolved issues that will ultimately cause a business to fail. Being honest does not mean you have to be rude. I currently really like Marissa Meyer and I still like Carly Fiorina. Two strong women, leaders in fact, who make decisions and stand by them on the way up and the way down. It's a rocky ride at the top.

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