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Corporate Grub Worms: What to Do When Issues Bubble Below the Surface

[By Dan Coughlin, Author of *Accelerate: 20 Practical Lessons to Boost Business Momentum*]

This summer, I had grub worms in my yard. I never really knew what grub worms were until this summer. A small corner of my front yard turned brown. I thought a neighbor's dog had syringed my yard.

I went away for a business trip for a week. When I came home, the spot was bigger, and I made a note to do something about it. Then I went on the road again. The next time, I noticed the yard on the side of my house was dead-not dying, dead.

A friend told me I might have grub worms, which I'd never heard of. So I bought some grub worm-control stuff and spread it around my yard. That didn't help, so I decided to read the directions. I had put down one-fourth the amount of grub worm control that I was supposed to. I bought two bags of grub worm control and killed those little suckers. And now I'm hoping I'll have a decent-looking yard by next summer.

Confronting the Work Grub Worms

You might not believe it, but you may have grub worms in your organization right now. You might even be spreading grub worm yourself. Grub worm spreaders in organizations are those people who smile at meetings and rip you apart behind closed doors. They do it with a smile usually, and it all seems so polite. Before you know it, issues you didn't even know were being discussed are suddenly the reason you aren't getting the opportunities you used to get.

Rather than ignoring the grub worms in your organization or just making a note to address them, I encourage you to get busy before your "career yard" is dead and you have to put down massive amounts of grub control to get the issues resolved.

Corporate grub worms are the bothersome issues that people don't talk about and that fester under the surface. Whether it's at work or at home, there's not much in life that is more difficult than having difficult conversations. These are the conversations where you have to discuss issues with people you live with or work with that neither of you really wants to discuss.

Problems with Avoiding Difficult Conversations

1. The issues fester, and you grow more frustrated.
2. What you are not discussing becomes bigger and worse than the actual issue.
3. A lack of trust builds up between you and the other person, and that lack of trust spreads to other people, especially if one of those involved is talking about the issue with other people.

Benefits of Having Difficult Conversations

1. You get to clear the air between the two of you.
2. You uncover what the other person's perspective really is.
3. You have a chance to build a stronger relationship in the future.

Nine Steps to Having a Difficult Conversation

1. **Genuine Caring and Respect:** Your face can't fake what your mind is thinking and your heart is feeling. If you don't

respect the other person and you don't care about him or her, then don't try to have a difficult conversation. It will make things worse. Identify in your mind why you care about this person and why you respect him or her enough to be honest.

2. **Timing:** In the midst of a crisis is not the time to have a difficult conversation, even if you have a scheduled meeting with the person. Be sensitive to the factors swirling around the potential conversation. If the person is clearly worn out, then ask what a better time would be.
3. **Privacy:** Never have a difficult conversation in front of other people. Go to a private space where the two of you can talk without anyone seeing your facial expressions or overhearing your comments.
4. **Two-Way Tact:** Lack of tact is a game killer in these situations. And that goes for both individuals. If the person shares how he or she feels and you say, "You're being too sensitive," you've just ruined the moment. Don't tell people they are too anything. That's your opinion, not a fact. Instead, listen for understanding, and make sure your words and your nonverbal cues demonstrate that you really are listening.
5. **Honesty Based on Observed Behaviors:** Now we're getting down to the meat



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and potatoes. Say, "This is what I saw happen, and this is what I felt. I saw _____, and consequently I felt _____. What are your thoughts on this situation?" Or if you didn't hear it personally but you've heard what happened several times, you could say, "I did not hear you say this. However, several people have now relayed these comments to me. So rather than wondering whether they're true or not, I just want to talk with you about the situation. Is that what you said?" If the person says it is correct, then you could say, "Okay, based on those comments, this is how I felt. What are your thoughts?" Now you've initiated the difficult conversation, and the two of you can begin to work toward resolving the underlying issues. Notice how this is far more effective than letting the situation grow larger and larger in your mind.

6. **Clarity:** Avoid the temptation to talk in vague terms. Instead, be very clear about what you saw or what you heard and how it made you feel. That's it.

Don't tell the other person he or she is wrong or evil. Simply state your point of view, and then let the other person respond.

7. **Time Frame:** You want an opportunity to have a relaxed, candid, and open conversation, not a rushed, in-your-face-and-out-the-door conversation. Establish a large enough time frame for your conversation so you can get your ideas and feelings on the table and the other person can get his or her ideas and feelings on the table. And then build in a little extra time so you two can wind down the conversation in a relaxed mode. Rushing these conversations can ruin not only your day but also the day of the other person and the days of all the people you two will interact with.

8. **Openness to Response:** When you open up and let another person know about a situation that bothered you, be genuinely open to listening while the other person shares a situation that bothered him or her. Don't become defensive. Simply listen to what the

other person has to say and consider it. Don't run off and tell other people. Just consider it.

9. **Follow-Up Conversation:** At the end of the difficult conversation, schedule a time to meet with the person again within two weeks to discuss the issues once more. Having one difficult conversation is not going to resolve the issue or the feelings you both have. Get together again and discuss how you both feel now.

About the Author

Dan Coughlin is a business keynote speaker, management consultant, and author of *Accelerate: 20 Practical Lessons to Boost Business Momentum*. He can be reached at dan@thecoughlincompany.com or www.businessacceleration.com. He has provided more than 1,500 executive coaching sessions and invested more than 3,000 hours on site observing executives and managers in more than 20 industries, including Coca-Cola, Toyota, Marriott, McDonald's, AT&T, and the St. Louis Cardinals.

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