

## Trust the canary in the coal mine

*Listen to your instincts when trouble looms – failure to act could cause more problems*

Before we had sophisticated scientific measures for detecting dangerous airborne substances in coal mines, a much simpler method was used: As they went into those dark tunnels, miners would bring along canaries in cages. If poisonous gases were present, the canaries would perish. Their deaths would alert the miners that lethal gases were threatening their own lives.

Consider this — somewhere inside you resides your very own built-in canary. Its job is to let you know when the invisible line between civility and incivility, right and wrong, has been crossed.

Here's how your canary does it: You might be taking part in an ordinary work-related conversation when suddenly someone makes a nasty remark about a colleague who is not present. Immediately, overwhelming discomfort overtakes you. It's a strong inner sensation, a gut feeling, that tells you some fundamental code has been violated. It might be a physical response, such as a pang in your stomach, or simply a sudden and indescribable sense of unease. While you may not be able to pinpoint exactly what is troubling you, you intuitively sense something isn't right.

Whenever you witness incivility (or worse) in the workplace, your canary is activated. It might be in response to someone belittling a colleague's work or rolling his eyes, sarcasm directed at an unsuspecting recipient or a culturally insensitive joke. In that moment, you feel compelled to do something and if you muster sufficient courage and wits, you actually do. Or you may just stand there, frozen by an inability to act.

Your canary has had hundreds, even thousands of years to develop its wisdom. That gut feeling is the result of generations of your cultural ancestors and your own family instructing their young on how to distinguish right from wrong and proper from improper. From the beginning of time, your forefathers and foremothers have been telling their children: "In our family, we don't behave that way," "Good people don't do those kinds of things" or "Go apologize to your sister right now for hurting her feelings." Hundreds of generations instructing, chastising and punishing all come to your aid when needed.



### ■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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Personal canaries vary greatly in the degree of sensitivity they possess. To some extent, your canary is the product of your background and societal privilege. The more privileged the group in which you were raised, the less sensitive your canary might be.

If, for example, you live in Canada and are a white, middle-aged, middle-class, Canadian-born, professional male, you may not be as intrinsically reactive to ostracism, injustice or power imbalances as someone who has not enjoyed your level of privilege and power.

At times, you might be puzzled and even irritated by someone who puts forth a seemingly trivial complaint about someone else's behaviour. It may be a matter as insignificant as another colleague not responding to a friendly morning greeting. You might think the complaint is petty, telling yourself this behaviour would never bother you and, therefore, the complainant should just get over it, be an adult and move on. When this happens, what you are essentially saying is your personal canary is not sensitive to this type of behaviour so other people should not be reacting so strongly to it.

Knowing your canary may not be as sharp as other people's is an important piece of information you should be aware of. When someone complains about a behaviour that wouldn't bother you and you are not sure whether it's a legitimate concern, ask yourself whether you'd feel comfortable with your customers or the public associating this behaviour with your organization. If you

wouldn't be proud of the behaviour reflecting on your brand, you need to act to restore civility and respect.

When your canary is triggered, it means you need to take some form of action to remedy the problems at hand. If you hold a leadership position or serve in an HR role, your silence will inevitably be interpreted as condoning the situation. Over time, things will get worse.

Acting on your canary's warning becomes even trickier when the situation is protracted or chronic. Those inner alarm sensations are strongest when they first hit. In the beginning, there is clarity and urgency to the inner call. However, if you do nothing about it, those internal voices become muffled. You lose your sense of certainty about the situation and become desensitized and even blind to recurrences of events that originally put your built-in compass on high alert. In these cases, the likelihood of you taking action diminishes significantly over time.

In situations where you choose to trust your canary when it has alerted you to the presence of a problem, the next step should be to apply rational, objective criteria to assess and analyze the situation, its severity and its impact on those involved and on the work itself. After that, the next challenge is to determine the exact nature of the action you should take. Will you respond on the spot or later? Will you take a light-touch approach or a more formal one? Will you focus only on those who were there, or go beyond?

The choices at your disposal are numerous, but here's the bottom line: First and foremost, trust your canary. It's one of the most reliable diagnostic tools that you will ever possess. It helps you identify when you must take action to restore respect and civility. And it is incumbent upon you to step up and do what's right, just as all those generations in your family and culture would expect you to do.

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