

Broken Windows

What to Expect When You Do Nothing

[TEAMOLOGY]

Intelligent Team Building

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When is a missed commitment a broken window? A strange question to be sure. But then, when you're looking for every edge you can find to succeed in a competitive environment you explore such questions. In fact, the answer to this question might mean the difference between a dysfunctional team and a high performance team culture.

I'm sure you desire a positive outcome when you attend to challenging team issues and interpersonal distractions. Yet, in many teams relational conflict is frequently avoided. So what happens when you ignore bad behavior? According to two well-noted criminologists quite a bit can happen. "Broken Windows," the social scientists say, send—and reinforce—a message that care and concern for the problem or predicament are absent.

The *Broken Windows Theory*, was brought to life in a 1982 *Atlantic Monthly* article by researchers James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. In this lively and thought-provoking investigation the authors uncovered insights into *inaction and its message*.

According to Wilson and Kelling, petty criminal behavior has the potential to lead to more disorderly behavior. The criminologists said that "social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is

*"Do as you please
because nobody cares."*

left unrepaired; all the rest of the windows will soon be broken." Why? Because the message sent by neglecting to attend to a seemingly insignificant act is that the owner of the building considers fixing the window a low priority. The tacit message is simply "do as you please because nobody cares."

Wilson and Kelling's findings (which were successfully enacted by many high profile police departments) clearly suggest that a broken window left untended will, over time, lead to deterioration of an orderly environment. A window, broken and left in its damaged condition, sends a signal of carelessness to those in the community. This opens the door (really the mind) to more bad behavior. So what does this have to do with your work team?

Organizational Broken Windows take shape in the form of missed commitments, unresolved disagreements, toxic defensiveness, shifting of blame, deceptive behavior, and violations of trust. They can also result from inadvertent actions with unintended consequences. However they happen, they must be tended to swiftly.

So let's just say it: yes, such behavior is often swept under the rug rather than dealt with openly, or avoided for fear of hurting feelings. When this happens bad actors get away with bad behavior. Worst of all, left unchecked you'll eventually see a progression of transgressions spread like a virus. Unacceptable behavior becomes acceptable. When others see an offender get away with a seemingly petty behavior, the message is *you too can get away with bad behavior*. Next time a window gets broken, don't throw your hands up in despair, just fix it. *-Cory*

TEAMOLOGY is a firm focused on leadership and team building. Successful team building requires the appropriate structures, relevant processes, and a nurturing culture.

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