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Beware the Invisible Agreement

*Last week, during a team meeting, my colleagues and I engaged in a conversation focusing on **“What We Are Learning from our Clients.”** Each of us expressed the way in which our current economic climate fosters fear, frustration, and uncertainty. It also magnifies the challenges that occur with long-held established invisible agreements in the workplace.*

What is an invisible agreement?

An invisible agreement occurs when a behavior is repeated three or more times without conversation or negotiation.

For example, Tom, a manager in an architectural firm, decides to arrive at the office half an hour before the official start of the work day in order to enjoy a cup of coffee, read the newspaper, reflect on the previous day and determine priorities. His boss gets wind that Tom is in early and calls to make a request. Tom responds. This scenario is repeated with other leaders making requests of him during his intended preparation time over the course of the next several days. Tom complies. Tom and the leaders have together instituted an invisible agreement. The invisible agreement is: Tom will be in early and he will respond to leader requests prior to the official start of the day.

On the surface, this invisible agreement does not appear to create a negative impact in the workplace. And yet, if the manager needs the time to “settle in” and plan for the day in order for him to do his best work, there are negative implications for the business.

We have learned in recent conversations with client leaders that many organizations have tolerated invisible agreements that negatively impact their business culture and ultimately their success. We have surfaced a number of invisible agreements with our clients that you may recognize in your own workplace.

Examples of invisible agreements:

- It is acceptable to arrive late and unprepared for a meeting.
- It is acceptable for managers to postpone performance reviews.
- It is acceptable to blame others for mistakes that are made.
- It is acceptable to miss the required dates for reports.
- It is acceptable to submit unrealistic business plans.
- It is acceptable to provide inaccurate financial reports.
- It is acceptable to conduct personal business at work.
- It is acceptable to withhold information.
- It is acceptable to create triangulation in communication.

No one would suggest that these behaviors have been consciously accepted as agreements within the workplace, and yet repeated behavior and corresponding tolerance create the invisible agreements that become the cultural norm. In today’s business climate, we must surface invisible agreements and determine their impact on our business success.