Safe Space Leadership

ARTICLE

The conversations waiting to happen

Every team has them. The difference is how leaders respond.

What surfaces, and what's assumed

22%
of employers reported complaints or claims related to conflict or poor workplace relationships
AHRI, 2026

93%
of employers say line managers are well equipped to identify psychosocial risks
AHRI, 2026

28%
of employers invest in leadership and management training to improve psychosocial safety
AHRI, 2026

There's a conversation in your organisation that hasn't happened yet. A concern someone has been sitting on for some time. A disagreement that remained unspoken after the meeting. A workload that has become too much, and no one wants to be first to say so.

These conversations rarely go away on their own. More often, they grow, until the conversation finally happens as a complaint, a team that has stopped offering ideas, or a resignation.

Why people hold back

Speaking up involves a quick calculation: is it safe to say this, will anyone listen, and will they follow through? If the answer to any of these is no, silence feels like the sensible choice. Saying nothing avoids the discomfort of raising it, the risk of being seen as difficult, and the fallout if it goes badly.

This is why a low number of complaints can create false confidence in how well concerns are being handled. The figures at the top of the page show the gap: most employers say line managers can spot these risks, yet most feel only "somewhat prepared" to manage them. The conversations still waiting don't appear in any report.

It starts with the leader

Speaking up is a choice each person makes. Leaders shape that choice in two ways: by making it easier, and by making it worth it.

Easier comes down to the questions they ask. "Is everything okay?" invites a yes. "What's something I might not be hearing about?" invites an answer.

Worth it comes down to what happens next. When someone raises something, a simple thank you sets the tone, even when it's hard to hear. Following through, and letting them know the outcome, earns the next conversation.

Making the hard conversations possible

This is the heart of the work at Safe Space Leadership. A safe space doesn't mean avoiding the difficult conversations. It means leaders creating the conditions where people can raise what's hard, trust it will be heard, and see it followed through.

Put it into practice

Our free prompt card, *Opening the conversations waiting to happen*, has questions to ask and three steps that make speaking up worth it.

safespaceleadership.com.au/resources

SSL builds leaders people choose to stay for.

General information about leadership practice. Source: Australian HR Institute, Quarterly Australian Work Outlook, June Quarter 2026 (606 employers; complaints or claims over the last two financial years; line manager capability is an employer self-assessment). Published November 2026. © Safe Space Leadership 2026