

# When Silence Ain't Golden

by Steve Simpson

Using or condoning 'the silent treatment' is unforgivable in any worker, let alone a leader.

One of the true stars of the game of Australian Rules Football is former Geelong player, Gary Ablett. In 2009, Ablett won the Brownlow medal, which is the highest accolade for an individual in the sport.

During the 2010 season there was huge conjecture as to whether Ablett would re-sign a contract with Geelong. This was despite the team having been extremely successful, winning the Premiership in 2008 and 2009 and at the same time, being a strong contender in 2010. As it transpired, Geelong did not make the 2010 final and at the conclusion of the season, Ablett announced he would be joining a new team entering the competition in 2011, the Gold Coast Suns.

After that announcement, Ablett has made some amazing revelations to the media. He has claimed that his Geelong coach, Mark Thompson, called Ablett into his office around round four or five in the 2010 season (which has 22 rounds before the finals). Apparently, the coach put pressure on Ablett to sign a new contract. Ablett, thinking this was not the role of the coach, wasn't prepared to reveal his thoughts at the time, resulting in "a pretty big argument."

Now, here's the startling part to this story.

Ablett reports, "I walked out, and he hasn't really spoken to me since, to be honest."

Here is one of the best players in the competition – and the coach has refused to speak to the player for almost the entire season because of an argument about whether the player was to re-commit to the club!

'Silent treatment' is a very common strategy for addressing conflict. We've all experienced it, and most of us have probably administered it. To some degree, it's in all likelihood a natural reaction to a difficult situation.

While I'm no psychologist, I would guess that silent treatment in the short term is sometimes a good thing to do. If there's been a heated debate, then all parties probably need to calm themselves and do a bit of reflection.

But when it is administered from a leader over a lengthy period of time, that's a different matter.

Of course, in local government, the impact of silent treatment would vary depending on the council's context and location. In small teams, or in small and remote councils, the silent treatment could have devastating effects as the recipient of the silent treatment has nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

How prevalent is the silent treatment? Research I did in preparation for this article presents a worrying picture, demonstrating it's a technique often used by workplace bullies to assert their authority over others. For example, in a survey conducted of more than 1000 Michigan workers, 35% reported being ignored or given the silent treatment over a five-day period. It's fair to presume that this silent treatment would have come from a mix of co-workers and managers.

This is where leadership comes into the picture.

I was working with a very senior leadership team recently, and halfway through the day I paused the session to ask each of the people in the room this question: "Are you a leader or a 'doer'?" One by one, each person in the room admitted that they were 'doers' which, as the following discussion shows, is not good news.

In our work with organisations on the UGRs ('unwritten ground rules' concept), we contend that the majority of UGRs are either caused or allowed by leaders. Importantly, this means two things:

1 Whatever behaviours a leader displays creates a UGR of: "around here, that's acceptable." This applies to acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. So if a leader dishes out the silent treatment then the UGR is "silent treatment is OK."

2 If a leader sees inappropriate behaviour occurring and does nothing then the UGR is: "around here, that's acceptable." So this is an equally important point – if leaders see silent treatment being administered and they do nothing, then the bullying behaviour is being sanctioned.

One key message from all of this is that leaders need to lead (rather than 'do') – they need to create and work on cultures that are characterised by productivity, cooperation and trust. They also need to show maturity in difficult situations – and refrain from giving the silent treatment to the people they are meant to lead!

Steve Simpson  
Speaker, author and consultant of  
Keystone Management Services  
[www.keystone-management.com](http://www.keystone-management.com)

