

Truth telling

Confronting the reality of
the lack of candor inside
organizations.

Authentic and honest internal communication results in better, faster decisions and actions. It also builds a culture of trust and collaboration where opposing views are debated and more effective solutions and innovations are created.

In reality, however, there is a distinct lack of truth-telling inside most organizations. I'm not talking about malevolent dishonesty. No-one goes to work thinking "I'm going to hinder my own and my company's performance by withholding the truth from my colleagues". I'm talking about the many moments each day where we think one thing, but say something different; where we have an idea that may be of value, but we hold back and say nothing; where we are called upon to give an honest opinion, but decide to say what is easier or what we think others want to hear.

Changing this behavior could revolutionize the way you interact with your colleagues, resulting in a significant increase in speed, efficiency, collaboration and trust. Ignoring it is likely to put you at a serious disadvantage in terms of realizing the full potential of your people. As Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, highlights in his book *Winning*:

Forget outside competition when your own worst enemy is the way you communicate with one another internally.

But what's the real possibility of changing individual, team and whole organization behavior so that candor rules and the business wins?

The answer is that it can be done, but of course it's not easy. It's not easy because there are many good reasons why we sometimes withhold the truth at work. Most of these reasons boil down to three fundamental underlying causes: socialization, fear and skills.

Socialization

We are socialized from childhood to be 'polite' and to try to manage how other people feel. There is a code of conduct that goes with politeness that demands that we lie in

order to avoid potentially hurting someone's feelings. For example, if someone sends you a sweater for your birthday that doesn't fit and is the wrong color, we are socialized into lying that it is lovely and just what we wanted. This is a trivial example, but we are brought up with hundreds of such trivial examples that socialize us into automatically lying or withholding the truth in an attempt to be polite and take care of how others' might feel.

How we are socialized strongly influences how we behave as adults in the workplace. An all too common example is that the whole truth is rarely told in performance appraisals, seriously hindering both trust-building and professional development.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that we go through life blurting out the truth at every possible opportunity – that's not a world I particularly want to live in. I am suggesting, however, that we need to re-examine some of our assumptions and conventions around how we communicate with our co-workers in order to build trust and get business success. After all, how much real trust can there be between colleagues who do not tell each other the whole truth? And how much business success can be built between people who feel the need to withhold their views and opinions in case it upsets the apple cart?

Fear

The second fundamental reason why truth-telling does not pervade most organizational cultures is that we fear the consequences, often with good reason. If you are working in a highly political culture with people you don't trust, you need to be both skilled and strategic about how you use the truth (you also need to ask yourself how much longer you want to work in such a culture!).

For most people, however, the fear is more about the imagined negative impact. Not only, we imagine, might we provoke conflict or pain, but we might also be perceived as abrasive, socially unskilled or just plain weird. One thing's for sure, in an environment where truth-telling is not the norm, we would certainly stand out by speaking frankly and many of us would prefer to keep our head down rather than present a stationary target.

With our clients we find there is often a lot of fantasy around the imagined negative consequences of telling others the truth. It's important to work out when our fears are grounded in reality and we need to behave carefully and strategically; and when our fears are imaginary and simply blocking effective communication with our colleagues.

Another common fear is that we lack the skills to both deliver our message directly and to manage the push-back or emotional response it is likely to elicit from others.

Skills

In an ideal world, just telling the truth with the intention of working collaboratively with others would be enough. It wouldn't matter that we might deliver our message clumsily or fail to manage the response quite as well as we might have liked. However, in the real world, where we need to develop long-term, trusting relationships with our colleagues, good intentions are not enough.

Developing the skills to present contentious opinions, deliver difficult feedback and manage resistance, emotion and conflict not only help us to influence effectively through truth-telling, but also give us the confidence to do it more often. If you currently lack these skills, or think you do, it makes absolute sense that you would avoid truth-telling in potentially difficult situations. But avoidance is not an effective long-term strategy for you, your team or your organization if you want to bring about change or achieve sustainable success.

Getting the elephant out of the corner and onto the table

A particularly gifted VP we are working with recently demonstrated the effectiveness of truth-telling. In a team meeting with his direct reports he metaphorically led the elephant out of the corner and put it on the table for all to see. These are not his exact words, but it went something like this:

Since the acquisition, we have been working in a highly pressurized and stressful environment. In January we are all going to receive a substantial bonus. I know that some of you will have already decided to take the money and leave. My guess

is that others of you are considering it. We all know this, but we've never talked about it and it's important because we can't plan effectively for the new year without this information.

I am not going to judge any of you in any way. If you decide to leave I quite understand and I will wish you well; if you have decided to stay, but only for a certain period, that's OK too. But we do need to know where we stand in order to make good decisions and plan effectively. There will be no negative consequences to telling the truth here. What I'd like to do is go around the table and ask each of you to tell us what your plans are and how you are thinking about it. I'll start...

This was a great example of truth-telling that led to increased candor, trust and effective decision-making and planning. One of the reasons that it worked so well was that this VP makes a habit of speaking frankly and honestly with the people he works with. People trust him and always know where they stand. He is one of the most successful and effective managers in his organization.

It's a killer

Jack Welch identifies truth-telling in organizations as "vital to winning" and the lack of it as "The biggest dirty little secret in business".

"Lack of candor basically blocks smart ideas, fast action, and good people contributing all the stuff they've got. It's a killer."

Developing an organizational culture where truth-telling is encouraged and rewarded; where you demonstrate honesty and plain-speaking at every opportunity; where you talk-up the advantages and successes of such behavior; and where you develop the skills to enable people to communicate honestly and effectively are all positive actions towards reaping the advantages of truth-telling in business.

If your organization is one that believes people are your most important asset and potentially your biggest

competitive advantage, you'd be crazy not to develop skilled and honest internal communication that enables this potential to be realized. It can be done, and fortunately you don't need to be Jack Welch to achieve it. ■

© Lynn Harris 2006