

The Importance of Honest Communication

If you think your company has a challenge with open and honest communication, you may only be seeing the surface issues, because it's easy – VERY easy – for an organization's communication culture to degrade from benign, passive mendacity into outright dishonesty and fraud.

Everything your organization has invested in communication technologies and training can go to waste if the communication “culture” isn't straight-forward and honest. It's easy to say (and think) that your managers and employees are truthful and direct in their communications, but ask yourself these questions:

- Are all employees (especially those at the lowest level) comfortable delivering bad news to their supervisors?
- Are executive and managers comfortable delivering bad news to employees?
- When an executive or managers comes up with an idea or project, are employees comfortable pointing out the potential flaws or expressing their doubts.
- If doubts ARE expressed about an executive's idea, do other employees express their own honest opinions, or do they help the executive “save face”?

These may be subtle points, and the answers probably aren't obvious, but it's important to recognize that it's difficult to develop a communication culture that is truly honest and open.

Are You Getting The Bad News You Need?

One of the worst experiences a manager, executive or supervisor can have is that dreadful sinking feeling that occurs when it's discovered that something bad you should have known about wasn't conveyed to you in a timely and useful way.

You can't be everywhere and you can't know everything, but not getting the bad news you need when you need it can be a very major problem. You look foolish, ignorant, and "out of it", regardless of who might be at fault for the lack of communication, and of course you end up wondering “What ELSE don't I know?” Not a great way to enhance a developing career particularly if your boss is also embarrassed.

Why Employees Don't Tell

Before we talk about some specific steps you can apply to encourage people to communicate openly and give you the bad news when you need it, it's important to understand some of the reasons why some employees hesitate doing so.

People vary in the degree to which they are comfortable communicating bad news. Some people, for example, have difficulty tolerating conflict and associate bad news with conflict situations. Others will hesitate because of embarrassment--because they feel responsible (even when they may not be). Others may feel that they can "fix" the problem before it has to go to you. The same processes that apply to family "secrets" and bad news apply in the workplace. Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do to counter-act these individual differences directly.

Another source of hesitancy may be your own behavior. If you tend to display your emotions easily, you may be intimidating staff when there is bad news to share. You may simply be making it easier for them to keep quiet and hope it blows over, rather than addressing and fixing the problem. Obviously you wouldn't deliberately set up such a scenario, but your personal style may be sufficiently emotional to scare off at least some people.

If your focus is on blame rather than on problem-solving, you will also be less "in the loop". Managers that are perceived as problem-solvers are less likely to intimidate staff into silence.

Even your general communication approach affects what you will hear and not hear. If you are generally attentive and appear interested, then you will be more likely to get what you need. If you convey the idea that you are busy, overwhelmed, uninterested, then staff are more likely to try not to "bother you", with what, to them, might appear like little things. Sometimes those little things are things you really need to know about in advance.

Organizational culture issues can also intimidate staff into silence. If your larger organization has a history of avoidance of conflict, secrecy, blaming, intimidation, and denial, then it is more likely that staff will keep silent as much as possible.

What Can You Do?

The best way to encourage more sharing of bad news, in a productive manner, is to address your own behaviors. Below are a number of suggestions.

- Learn the distinction between blame, and problem-solving. When bad news comes to you, first address the problem rather than spend your time determining who has messed up. If it is absolutely necessary to determine where the fault occurred, don't look just for a person to "hang the problem on." Use the incident as an opportunity to PREVENT further occurrences rather than to blame. This kind of process tells staff they aren't going to get dumped on if they bring you bad news.
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- Consider your own emotionality of expression. Some people express both their pleasure and their displeasure very openly. Others come across as more reasoned and calm. There isn't really a right or wrong, here, but if you tend to be on the flamboyant open side emotionally, consider toning it down a bit, generally. Why? Because strong expressions of emotion can frighten people, particularly those over whom you hold some degree of power.
- Work on creating a culture that values both finding and solving problems. The best way to do that is to role model the attitude with staff, consistently. When YOU make a mistake, share that mistake, accepting responsibility, and model the problem-solving process. That might mean explaining what actions you will be taking to avoid making the same error again. That's what you want from staff, and you need to demonstrate it consistently.
- Some organizations like to open staff meetings with a discussion of some "triumph" that has occurred since the last meeting, a job well done, or some other success. The idea, of course is to celebrate accomplishments, and that makes sense. Consider though, that while this may be somewhat morale heightening, it's effect is limited if there are other unspoken problems and mess-ups occurring. Successes do not counter-balance mistakes. What really increases morale is fixing the mistakes so they don't happen anymore.
- Another approach is to open each meeting with a "hassle-hunting" process, where you spend a small amount of time identifying problems, complaints, etc that have come up since the last meeting, and working to overcome them. This technique is used in some hospitality sector organizations (like hotels). Again the focus is on bringing problems to light so they can be fixed. Of course, you can still celebrate successes, but you will contribute to a more open culture by encouraging continuous improvement.
- Managing understanding is an important part of ensuring that you get the bad news you need. One reason staff don't come with bad news is that they do not understand the significance or importance of some things that occur. Your view of events may be different. What may seem important for you may seem trivial to staff. So it is always useful to clarify what kinds of information you need, when you need them, and WHY you need them. The why is important because it helps cement your needs psychologically, in the minds of your staff.
- Finally, if your organization has a history of secrecy, avoidance of problems and conflict, recognize that it is going to take some time for that culture to change. The key here is your consistency, and how you handle bad news. Make it worthwhile and safe for staff to talk to you and you will get what you need when you need it.

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When a work environment lacks basic trust, productivity suffers along with the balance sheet. In most cases, employee dishonesty begins with the little things – using company time for personal tasks, taking longer breaks, not telling supervisors the “whole” truth, etc. – and this can often be justified by some employees if they feel that the company itself isn’t completely honest in its communication with them or their customers. So it’s extremely important that the culture of honest communication begins at the top and works its way down through the ranks.

In a recent survey conducted by Frontline Learning, 4 percent of workers said they had taken credit for a colleague's idea, five percent had lied to or deceived their supervisors on a serious matter, and three percent of supervisors had done the same to an employee. This survey also found that nearly 60 percent of those surveyed felt that dishonesty could be reduced through better communication and a serious commitment by supervisors.

The High Cost of Low Trust

The United States Justice Department has estimated that internal theft costs businesses more than \$40 billion a year. This figure is currently rising at 15 percent annually. Employee theft has been estimated to eat up 6 percent of annual revenues. This dishonesty is even more substantial in regards to "time theft," which costs American business an estimated \$177 billion a year. This "time theft" includes sick days being used for something other than sickness and by counterproductive workers. Yes, the price of a distrustful communication culture can be very high indeed.

Time for a Communication Culture “Clean Up?”

If you should decide that your organization needs a major cultural “clean-up” you should be very open and honest in your intent and strategy. Make sure you address organizational issues and patterns, not individuals. Although individuals may surface as a key factor in some areas, the process for clean up must be fair and give people time and support to change to the new way of doing business.

Leaders, managers and employees must communicate the connection between poor/inaccurate communication and the negative impact to the business. Without naming names or pointing fingers, identifying examples of stonewalling, stifled problem solving, etc., is critical for the learning process to take place. Describe the communication culture in concrete, behavioral terms. By putting a name to it, people are in a better position to challenge unproductive behavior.

And finally remember, communication cultures are created, set, and condoned by leadership. Clean-up strategies that focus on middle managers and employees are doomed to fail. Leaders must partner with the human resource experts in strategizing and implementing a clean-up plan. If there are issues at the leadership level, these should be addressed first.
