

Don't Shoot the Messenger!

Why push-back is useful communication

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The phrase “open, honest communication” is rapidly entering the realm of platitude, and that’s unfortunate. Just at the time we need more of it, people are using the words in a way that generates confusion, rather than clarity.

For instance, your mental picture of what constitutes open and honest communication may be perfect for the situation, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to match mine. Unless we are aware of this and share specific definitions early in our interaction, we may easily slip down separate paths together.

When Prof. Michael Beer¹ tells Concordia University’s business graduates to go forth and help organizations create “honest conversations” in the pursuit of common goals, what exactly does that mean? When the students read W. Edwards Deming’s classic *Out of the Crisis* and find two of his 14 points address the same issue², do they simply admire the aspiration, or do they actually have a practical sense of how to achieve the goal?

In his most recent work, *Breaking the Code of Change*, Prof. Beer refers to “silent killers” that stifle genuine communication and he advocates for a voice upward. As all pupils of Drs. James and Larisa Grunig³ know, symmetrical two-way communication requires the opportunity for moving information upward – as well as sideways and all around.

It is important to allow people to speak up because push-back is resistance that arises from unmet needs, conscious or unconscious. We may have overlooked important aspects of the situation and a contrary voice upward could be a salvation call in disguise.

Silence is a Killer

Barriers that silence employees are both implicit and explicit, and include senior managers who model issue avoidance, colleagues who dissociate themselves from those who speak out, and corporate culture that equates difference with disloyalty. We sense and respond to our environment on many levels and it is not only teenagers who capitulate to the pressure to conform.⁴

Beyond the price that the outspoken individual pays - in terms of the consequences created by suppressed negative emotions – by silencing the upward voice, the organization sacrifices creativity, commitment and productivity. And not only of that person, but of everyone who observes the censure. After all, the opposite of conflict is not harmony, but disconnection – a loss of interest and concern.

That is truly a loss, because conflict holds the potential to increase options, widen understanding and enrich team interaction – if handled respectfully. The skills required include focusing on issues, rather than personalities and eliciting underlying motivation, rather than getting trapped in fixed positions.⁵



To free up creativity and productivity in the organization, it is not just the CEO and other senior leaders who must learn these lessons and walk this talk. There is a role for each one of us in this regard; further, increasing capacity in the middle ranks develops organizational resilience.

Spreading leadership throughout has long been an organizational development goal. Repeatedly, the downside has been the same: diffusion of accountability until no one is accountable. Turns out the answer is not more individual leaders, but “... getting more people involved in the process of accomplishing the leadership tasks,” says Wilfred H. Drath, group director of the Leadership for Complex Challenges practice and senior fellow at the Centre for Creative Leadership.⁶

“Instead the answer is to create richer and more complex processes of accomplishing the leadership tasks. Focus on how to create direction, alignment, and commitment in the face of complex challenges, and forget about how many people are, or are not, leaders. This makes it possible to focus not on the way leadership is practiced, but rather on what people hope to *accomplish* with leadership.”

One good example of how the desired outcomes of leadership were spread throughout an organization comes from Guidant (*formerly Advanced Cardiovascular Systems a medical device manufacturer*). Shortly after being named president and CEO, Ginger L. Graham stepped out of the usual oratorical bounds at a national meeting of the company's sales force; she decided to tell the truth about ACS's disappointing performance – in finance, manufacturing, and product development. These facts were open secrets and the fact that no one spoke openly about them was eroding morale and trust.⁷

People were first shocked and then delighted with her performance. “By the time I'd finished, they were shouting their approval and standing up to applaud. Their response confirmed what I had already suspected – that the employees were desperate to hear that someone at the top knew the truth and was willing to admit it.

“From that moment, I was determined to create a culture that would allow everyone in the company to feel free to tell the truth, from top managers to the people on the loading dock.

“Only by arming ourselves with the truth, I felt, by owning up to it, and by acting according to it, could deep-rooted problems be identified, understood, and ultimately solved.”

Coaches from the rank-and-file

For approximately the next 10 years, Ms Graham led a team that welcomed a wide variety of ways that enabled employees from all across the organization to speak to them directly. For instance, they turned the usual communication flow upside down by recruiting a cross-section of employees to act as coaches to the senior executives. Ms Graham's coach was Kevin Bracamonte, usually employed on the company's loading dock.

After some training in how to interview people, to distinguish between run-of-the-mill grousing and constructive criticism, he spent several weeks gathering comments about her performance from all areas of the company – R&D engineers, middle management, manufacturing assemblers and others.



“Kevin provided a great perspective. I heard what mattered to the employees, as opposed to what I thought mattered,” Ms Graham says.

In response to the things she heard, Ms Graham chose to change some of her practices: e.g. becoming more visible by walking around the premises regularly, eating lunch in the staff cafeteria, inviting employees to “ask-me-anything” brown bag lunches. In addition to bringing grassroots information directly to her, Mr. Bracamonte also took Ms Graham’s point of view to his co-workers.

She offers a four-point plan for building a culture of honesty:

1. Assign non-executive coaches to senior managers to drum up grassroots feedback.
2. Tell the whole truth to the rank and file and, in exchange, ask for their help in solving company problems.
3. Mythologize truth-tellers and truth-telling in stories and rituals.
4. Police yourselves in public “honesty” forums.

Personal change required

Another reason for championing distributive leadership lies in the nature of the complex challenges facing organizations today. Today’s business situations need a radically different way of bringing an organization’s best minds to focus on the current finely nuanced challenges. As noted earlier, layering on more leaders is not the answer.

William Drath explains that complex challenges are not just very complicated problems. Rather they involve the unknown and require people to move into uncharted territory.

“A technical problem arises and is solved without any fundamental change in assumptions, methods or tools. Also, the people who solve a technical problem don’t themselves have to change.”

Indeed, a technical problem involves comprehensible difficulties which we solve by means we already understand. On the other hand: “Existing assumptions, methods or tools are no good in the face of a complex challenge and may even get in the way,” Mr. Drath says. “Complex challenges require people and organizations to change, often in profound and fundamental ways.”

Complex challenges today arise from situations such as merging cultures following corporate take-overs; trying to “fix” the health care system, and shifting a company’s vision from product push to customer pull. The inherent difficulty is that none of us has a clairvoyant on staff. No one knows what the required future will look like, although we are pretty sure it will involve new systems, methods, tools, habits and practices.

Increasingly, the complexity of the problems we face calls for an equally complex capability to respond. Thus, the advantages of a highly resilient organization, with broad and deep leadership capacity, are becoming self-evident.

Gina Hernez-Broome and Richard L. Hughes⁸, also with the Center for Creative Leadership, explain it this way: “Getting more people working together in more ways increases the likelihood that people who are able to make



the needed changes themselves will become influential in the leadership process. We call this *connected leadership*.

“As a result, leadership will be understood as the collective capacity of *all* members of an organization to accomplish such critical tasks as setting direction, creating alignment, and gaining commitment.”

Nevertheless – as Ginger Graham demonstrated so well – permission to engage in these behaviours and enlarge the leadership quotient in any organization still emerges from the top. Michael Beer adds that transformation rests on a senior team that can actually perform as a team, to facilitate “alignment” at every level, plus capacity to adapt and learn.

For those reasons, today's last word goes to Marvin Bower⁹, managing partner of McKinsey & Company from 1950 to 1967. In a 1997 publication he observed that an organization's senior leaders have the means to foster open, honest communication. “CEOs ought to focus on three key areas: listening with an open mind, being consistently truthful, and becoming approachable.”

end

Footnotes

1. Michael Beer is Cahners-Rabb Professor of Business Administration, Emeritus at the Harvard Business School; Chairman, Center for Organizational Fitness, and founder and Director of Organizational Research and Development, Corning Inc. His most recent book, edited with Nitin Nohria, is *Breaking the Code of Change*. Previously he published *The Critical Path to Corporate Renewal* that won the Johnson, Smith & Knisely Award for the best book on executive leadership that year. Earlier, his *Managing Human Assets*, was the first to frame human resource management as a general management responsibility.
http://dor.hbs.edu/fi_redirect.jhtml?facInfo=bio&facEmId=mbeer@hbs.edu&loc=extrn
2. *Out of the Crisis*, W. Edwards Deming, 1986; 14 points, including: #8. Drive out fear, so that everyone may work effectively for the company. and #14. Put everybody in the company to work to accomplish the transformation. The transformation is everybody's job.
3. *Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Dozier, D.M., Grunig, L., Grunig, J; Lawrence Ehrlbaum and Associates, 1995.
4. *Is Silence Killing Your Company?*, Leslie Perlow and Stephanie Williams, Harvard Business Review, May 2003
5. *Behaviour Is Communication When Managing People*, part 1; Carol J. Sutton APR, Fellow CPRS;
<http://www.prcanada.com> (July 2003)
6. *Leadership In Action*, Wilfred H. Drath, Center for Creative Leadership, March/April 2003;
<http://www.ccl.org>
7. *If You Want Honesty, Break Some Rules*, Ginger L. Graham, Harvard Business Review, April 2002.
8. *Leadership Development: Past, Present and Future*, Dr. Gina Hernez-Broome and Dr. Richard L. Hughes, the Center for Creative Leadership, published in Human Resource Planning;
<http://www.ccl.org/CCLCommerce/pdf/research/cclLeadershipDevelopment.pdf>
9. *Developing Leaders in a Business*, Marvin Bower, The McKinsey Quarterly, 1997, No. 4