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Culture of Truth



Many organizations have developed cultures that encourage people to distrust what they hear and to guard what they say.

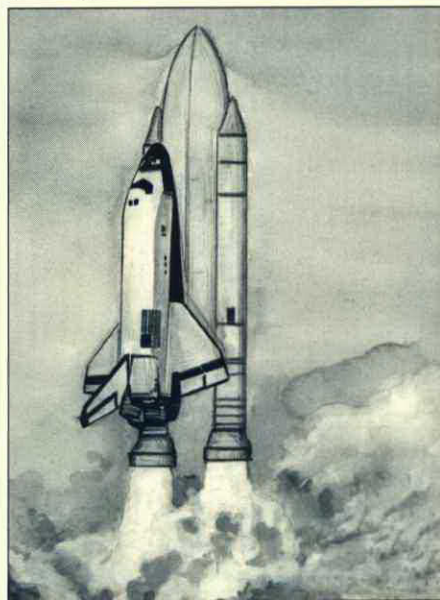
SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I CONDUCTED a team-building session with the officers of a billion-dollar corporation. All 22 of the officers had response pads in front of them so they could anonymously answer "yes," "no," or push a number correlated to one of several other possible answers. Their answers were automatically tabulated and displayed immediately on a screen in front of them.

As the session progressed, it was obvious this group was not honest with each other. When I asked them, "Are you going to tell the truth over the next three days?" eleven responded "yes" while the other eleven said "no."

After their response, the president of the company began a tirade about dishonesty. He spent the next 10 minutes giving the team hell for their answers. Afterward, I again posed the question. This time, the responses were equally split; however, many of the people who had responded with a "yes" to the first question changed their response to a "no" on the second and vice versa.

I told these officers, "You have moved to a new level of dishonesty. You are now being dishonest about your honesty." The very behavior the president displayed had contributed to the team

not being honest with each other, and the result of his harangue was the opposite of what he said he wanted. Imagine a group of leaders responsible for multi-million dollar decisions affecting the lives of their employees and customers, and yet they do not tell each other the truth!



The Norm, Not Exception

In my 15 years of consulting, I find this experience to be the norm, not the exception. Many organizations have cultures that encourage people to say only what is okay to be heard. In most cases, members can't express what is on their mind or be honest with how they view the world. This politically-correct approach to relationships and communication represents an enormous waste. The time and ener-

gy spent not telling the truth instead of telling—"what is so for me"—is costly in both human terms and bottom-line results.

How believable are the formal communications of most organizations? According to the Conference Board, the national average is 52 percent—meaning that about half of the people don't believe what they hear in their organizations.

The implications of this statistic are immense. Even when facing a crisis, executives can't convince their co-workers that a crisis is imminent. Sadly, many leaders deserve this cynicism because of the way they misuse information and play with truth, often in the name of public relations or politics.

For example, consider the Challenger Space Shuttle incident in 1986. Engineers on that project knew the lowered temperatures could impact the O-rings; however, they believed they could not say anything without putting their jobs at risk. This culture of not telling the truth contributed to the loss of seven lives and put our space program in a downward spiral we have not yet recovered from.

Recently a colleague recounted an experience he had with a hospital client. One of the nurses he interviewed had assisted in a surgery where the doctor removed the wrong lung of a cancer patient. As the doctor cut out the healthy lung, the nurse knew that he was removing the wrong one. But she believed if she said anything, she was at risk of losing her job and incurring the wrath of a lead surgeon, who was well known for his ego and disliked being challenged.

We have developed cultures where people fear honest expression and distrust each other. Whatever the reasons, the outcome is the same—lowered productivity, wasted time, inaccurate information, loss of self-esteem and integrity.

The Truth Works

Michael Hammer, coauthor of *Reengineering the Corporation*, recently com-

mented, "Don't tell the truth because it is right, tell the truth because it works." How much time do we waste in trying to figure out how to say something so that it will be "okay" and end up never saying it or changing the meaning to the point that the message is never received?

Many years ago, one of my mentors advised me that if I was working too hard to figure out how to say something, it was most important for me to *just say it*. Of course, we need to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of others; however, we also need to be true to our own integrity. Our intention for telling the truth must be based on wanting to add value rather than to inflict pain.

Too many times, I have participated in important meetings where the climate is one of "say what is okay" and "don't rock the boat." These meetings are a waste of time and effort. As soon as the meeting is adjourned, people find the person they most trust and discuss what really needed to be said in the meeting. The truth—"what was really of importance"—never got expressed in a forum where something could be done.

Consequently, time is wasted and decisions are made based on inaccurate information. Sometimes the repercussions are immediate; other times, the consequences don't manifest themselves for a long time. In the case of the Challenger Space Shuttle, the consequences were significant and played out over a very short period of time in front of millions of viewers.

Why would we choose to operate from any position but the truth? Too often, our leaders don't want to hear what is really

going on. Many times, this translates into "don't surprise me," "don't share bad news with the boss," or "we can fix that before anyone finds out about it" mentality. I have never had one CEO tell me they wanted people to lie to them. However, I have had many who establish a climate for distrust and dishonesty by their actions or lack of same.

Culture Check

What kind of climate of truth have you developed? Do people in your organizations believe they can tell the truth that resides within them?

Creating cultures where we can all express "what is so for us" requires conscious and consistent effort. At the Herman Miller company, they state: "We believe the truth is good enough." They communicate with that criteria in mind. They don't try to put a spin on the truth to make it okay; they just tell the truth. Think how simple life could be if we told the truth all of the time.

A national survey conducted two years ago and published in the book *When America Told the Truth* revealed that "90 percent of Americans admitted to lying on an occasional basis, 70 percent admitted to lying on a regular basis."

When he first began working in the area of "truth telling," Will Schutz told me that he thought he had a market for educating people about how to tell the truth. What he discovered was the reverse—the truth is not very popular.

Creating cultures of truth require us to articulate value systems that reflect the ethics and integrity of the organization. Once we have identified these

value systems, we need to help each other adhere to these "codes of conduct." The values need to be shared, meaning we all have a chance to provide input and to buy into the value system. In addition, we need to ensure people are never punished for telling the truth. We often kill the messenger or the climate by not wanting to hear what needs to be said or by reacting in a way that it is interpreted in that way.

Our people need to know not only that it's okay to tell the truth, but that it's expected. Truth needs to be seen as the norm. Not telling the truth must be perceived as a higher-risk endeavor than telling the truth. Simple acts send significant messages.

Whenever we talk to the organization and put a spin on something, we undermine the entire climate of truth telling. I have often heard in-house legal counsel advise against telling the truth. When we do this, we turn our organizations into breeding grounds for dishonesty.

Also, I have often heard people say, "I didn't tell a lie. I didn't say anything." Withholding information, according to Will Schutz, is the most sophisticated form of lying we have.

Each of us knows when we are operating with integrity. That feeling of having our actions aligned with our internal philosophy of life is apparent to us. Integrity requires us to take personal responsibility for knowing our own truth and expressing it. And it requires our leaders to model congruence in what they do and ask of us. **EE**

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