

How Leaders Can Create A Safe And Open Organizational Culture: Empowering The Organization And Everyone In It



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Leadership

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When an organization faces a disaster or misses an opportunity, hindsight reveals all the signs were there, but those who saw, did not feel comfortable sharing what they knew. The responsibility lies with the organization's leader, who must create a culture in which people feel safe and empowered to report emerging difficulties or suggest a change of course. Too many leaders fail at this essential task. As a result, their followers often feel frustrated, powerless and unwilling to surface impending issues.

In these times of unpredictable, continual change, it is essential that colleagues feel comfortable sharing bad news, admitting mistakes or predicting difficulties and a need for change. However, when things are going well, nobody wants to be the one who disturbs the ship.

Even a very effective organization can have a culture that does not support contention or disagreement, weakening its ability to respond to brewing crises. As an old homily goes, there are two things leaders never get: a bad meal and the truth.

Understandable. Humans tend to desire social harmony and create it by avoiding upsetting, difficult or conflictual matters. We learn from childhood that this is the essence of good manners. But the purchase of this false serenity comes at the cost of ignoring submerged issues. In addition, when we are upset about something and do not address it, unpleasant feelings and emotional distancing build up, limiting trust in the relationship. Like tooth decay, avoidance builds quietly until it erupts in pain. In the business world, the cost of avoidance is high. Nonetheless, avoiding contentious issues is common and destructive within any organization.

Repressed communication arises when leaders are so enamored with their own point of view that they push it forward without any awareness or sensitivity as to how this affects others. An assumptive manner leads to unshared and repressed feelings within the organization. Leaders who ignore, belittle or blame others are again creating a closed atmosphere and will often find their wishes undermined or ignored. It is true that many people instinctively resist change and new ideas (indeed, one might argue that is why they are not leaders), but to be effective, the leader must be sensitive to this reality and deal with it tactfully and compassionately.

Leaders are entirely dependent on their employees to get things done, but unless that leader is aware of what others are seeing or how their own actions are being viewed, they are flying blind. Employees often know about those who are cutting corners on safety

or performing poorly, and are frequently aware of forthcoming problems that the culture of avoidance tells them to not bring forward. When the leader looks the other way or does not seek information, disaster can strike quickly. How can the leader open a discussion where others are both candid and open to new ideas?

The Core of the Problem

Leaders often have trouble understanding why they need to listen to others. They want what they want and seem to forget that they cannot get it unless they hear, understand and respect what others see and want as well. This is a lesson we are taught in kindergarten—a lesson leaders often forget.

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Many people in power are not used to being open to ideas from others. They think that leadership means they should tell people what to do, rather than listen. How many leaders have missed getting warnings about potential disasters because they did not seem open to hearing from their employees? But raising a difficult issue means you need to be truly ready to listen to others and consider changing your own perspective. This aspect of emotional intelligence—being open to listen and learn—does not take away from the leader’s power. Instead, it allows the leader’s vision to expand to consider other ways forward than the path they initially chose, and difficulties that lie along the path.



Forging a Solution

To create an open environment, leaders must introduce and address

issues that others would rather suppress *and* take the time to listen to those who are reluctant to follow the leader's direction. Four practices enable a leader to create a positive climate for open discussions:

1. Look to the future.
2. Enroll others in your quest.
3. Deliver your message directly and without judgment.
4. Listen well.

Then, the dialogue can begin, with all parties working together in mutual respect.

1. Look to the Future.

When leaders learn about missteps or missed opportunities, their tendency is to blame those around them. Their impulse is to kill the messenger. But when you, the leader, shift your attention back to yourself and what you can do, away from the past and toward the future, you move from blame to responsibility. And since you are the one who wants to address the issue, you are the one who must act.

Begin by choosing a specific issue you want to address. It might be something you want colleagues and team members to do, some way you want them to change, or something they have done that upset you. Before you begin the discussion, ask yourself, "*What do I want them to do about it?*" The past can not be undone, so the challenge is to move forward together along a new path. Perhaps some repair work can be done. What would that look like? The shift from what you want to what you want others to do is often more difficult than you might think. Moving from what happened in the past to what you want in the future is the starting point for an effective

conversation.

2. Enroll Others in Your Quest.

Before leaders can begin a conversation about a difficult issue, they must get the others' attention and agreement to discuss the issue. This takes thoughtful preparation, which is often neglected. Such neglect can lead to the discussion unfolding in the wrong time and place and with its purpose unclear.

Thoughtful preparation begins with the leader telling the individual or group why this issue matters to you and your desire to address it openly. Participants will need some time to think about it, asking in advance and setting a time and place is helpful. It should be a safe, quiet, neutral place where time is set aside and there are no interruptions. When people are surprised, they become resistant and prone to emotional outbursts. Giving time to consider and react before the actual meeting can help them arrive with a more receptive mindset.

It's important to let others know why you think it might be useful for them to consider changes. At the same time, you must communicate that you are open to listening to and respecting their pushback. You cannot change their behavior or direction until you hear their concerns, objections and points of view. They may be sitting on crucial information that would change your view if only you could hear it.

3. Deliver Your Message Directly and Without Judgment.

It is up to you to the leader to initiate the conversation. You need to say what you want in a way that does not blame others, does not

push them away and does not attack, but which nonetheless directly states your concerns and desires.

The delivery of a clear message is best done through what is called an “I” statement, because it begins with yourself. You state what you see, how you feel and what you want. Using the word “I” makes it less likely that you will blame the other person or persons. You might be upset by what they have done, but you are only aware of their actions and do not know their intention—and if you assume what they intended, you will probably be wrong. Thus, while the action may have been hurtful, it is now time for you to learn what the other person intended. By starting with this openness to learning, you set a climate for others to act in the same way.

People need to discuss their intentions and goals because so much human interaction dissolves into conflict due to misunderstanding, seeing actions and assuming intentions rather than listening each other. Emotional intelligence means knowing that your intentions are not always clear in your actions and the same truth holds for others. The conversation you are now beginning is about unraveling false assumptions and miscommunications. Taking responsibility by clarifying your own intentions allows others to join you on a positive path.

Two concerns interfere with setting a climate for a candid discussion. First, people fear that there will be reprisals if they are open, and this is often a reasonable concern. How can they be assured that there will be no reprisals? Policies must be in place that support this. Second, others might feel that this is a gesture and that after the meeting the climate will swing back to avoidance and secrecy. How can you assure them that this is not a one-off but that

you want to see this as a real shift? There are no easy answers to this, but if your initial statement addresses these concerns and responds to them, there is a greater chance to have a real impact.

4. Listen Well.

After you have delivered your message, the focus must shift—totally. It is now time for you to listen. Listening does not mean being silent but is about asking questions, probing for more and allowing others to talk without your interrupting them by restating your position or arguing. It is difficult to become a listener; it takes patience, practice and intention.

You may find yourself being triggered emotionally by what someone says, and you might want to lash out or withdraw (the fight or flight response). But this is where you have a choice: Do you have to respond now, or can you be patient, set it aside and try to learn the other's intention? When the people involved in the discussion have a complex emotional history, perhaps by being family members, they may need a coach to help keep them from getting tripped up by these triggers that lead the conversation astray.

After each person shares their intention and point of view, productive exchange can begin.

Toward an Open Organizational Culture

The ultimate agreement from these discussions will most likely not be something that any participant expected to begin with. But the outcomes that matter most are that each person learns something, and mutual trust is enhanced. This allows everyone to find ways to move forward that take all different perspectives and desires into

account.

Much more can be said about creating an open and candid organizational climate. The procedures described above delineate the first steps a leader can take to begin this transformation, a transformation that can enhance or even save an organization.

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