

DANCING WITH THE...TRUTH

It might seem that a concept so simple as truth telling is not worthy of an article in the Human Resources realm, but the common experience of many HR professionals and Managers to whom I have spoken leads me to think otherwise. In many workplaces and in many settings telling the actual truth would be far down the list in terms of options managers use in relational settings. Whether the context is performance management, resolution of conflict, identification of problems, succession management or almost any HR setting, truth telling often comes a remote second to avoidance, manipulation, circumnavigation, minor deception, and even, sometimes, out and out denial.

The motivation for putting these lesser alternatives before actual honesty may be to reduce conflict, alleviate hurt feelings, eliminate discomfort or from a misguided sense of graciousness. The results, however, are often costly, because avoiding straightforward truth allows for problem situations to continue unabated, at best, or in the more likely scenario, to spiral into major dilemmas and explosions.

Perhaps you will recognize some of these “moves” which we sometimes use in order to avoid the hard conversations:

The Performance Management Sidestep

Canadian case law is filled with wrongful termination lawsuits where the company's case is sabotaged by a series of performance evaluations which failed to identify the issues that led to termination. In many of these cases the performance issues existed, but managers “sidestepped” the discussion. Few of us enjoy conflict or criticism and we find many ways to avoid it, many of which are counterproductive to the organization's goals.

The “If We Don't Acknowledge It, Maybe It Will Go Away” Twist

This is also known as “*the elephant on the table*”. The issue is large, it is known to everyone, but no one has permission or confidence to name it. The motivation might be a desire to spare someone's feelings, a fear that talking about it will only make it worse, or simply an organizational culture that is not “safe” for dealing with these issues. In any case the “elephant” will always reduce morale, lower productivity, and diminish engagement.

The “Make Life Miserable and Maybe They'll Leave” Shuffle

In this “dance” the manager is not satisfied with an individual's performance, but is not comfortable talking directly about it, or not willing to put the work in to developing a performance improvement plan with behaviours and measures outlined. It is easier, they think, to load on more work or change working conditions in hopes that the person will simply leave. The problem with this approach (actually just one problem of many) is that poor performers can also be quite resilient and tolerate the changes for quite some time. During that time productivity continues to suffer, morale and engagement of other impacted employees falters, and the manager's frustration level increases.

How can we increase our ease with delivering hard truths? How can we be straightforward and deliver difficult messages without destroying people's confidence and without inciting a resistant or defensive attitude? It is possible to create an environment of truth and to communicate the tough messages without it becoming ugly. The three suggestions below should help you or your managers be able to stop dancing and start communicating in a direct and productive manner.

1. Earn the right to tell the truth

If you are delivering a hard message, whether it is about poor performance, diminished reliability, toxic attitude, decreased engagement, or any similar issue, the more credibility you have gained the more readily the message will be received. This credibility comes from three main practices. Demonstrating care and concern for staff on a consistent basis creates relationships which form the context for productive conversations. Modeling the behaviours you are requesting is also key – a message on dependability rings hollow if you've missed 3 of the past 10 Mondays. Finally, you earn the right to confront the behaviour or attitude by presenting an alternative behaviour or attitude with concrete measures, rather than just saying, "change this". If these three things are in place the chances of your message being received positively increase dramatically.

2. Draw from your own humanity and flaws

What stops difficult conversations from being effective? In most cases it is that the individual on the receiving end becomes defensive and their self-protective filters block out the message. When any of us hears "you are wrong" our instinctive response is "no, I am not!". Therefore it is important to lower the defensiveness response. One way of doing this is by being up front about your own humanity. You likely have a story from your own past on which to draw. By identifying yourself with the person to whom you are talking you accomplish a couple very important things: you increase your sense of understanding by remembering your own flaws, and you reduce defensiveness on the part of the recipient.

3. Use a story or illustration to communicate the message

Finally, one of the most effective ways of beginning a difficult conversation or communicating a hard truth is to use story. Some of the greatest thinkers of all time communicated their message through story. People with little interest in philosophy are fascinated by Plato's story about the cave. You may know very little theology, but likely you could remember at least one of the parables of Jesus or a couple of Aesop's fables. We remember stories and our interest in them keeps us listening without defensiveness, often until it's too late – we were caught up in the story before we realized it was about us. An illustration I have used effectively is to liken a work setting to a poker game (this tends to gain attention quickly!). I explain that you get a few chips when you start the job and after that your chip stack is up to you. Going over and above, doing a great job on a project, consistent reliability and similar behaviours gain you chips. Absences, poor attitude or disengagement and overdue projects lose you chips. At this point I will often say, "You have pretty much used up your chip stack", and go on to explain the things that have caused this. Use of the story or metaphor keeps the individual engaged in the conversation much longer than starting with "Your performance isn't where we need it".

Avoiding, sidestepping, or dancing around the truth is not a path to organizational effectiveness. Hopefully these suggestions can help you increase the ability to deliver hard messages and prove the old adage that “the truth will set you free”.

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