

Everything I Needed to Know About Leadership I Learned...In the Dentist's Office

Kindergarten may have been enough for Robert Fulghum to learn what he needed for life, but it was the dentist office that taught me what I needed to know about leadership. My dentist and hygienist would likely be surprised to know it, and would perhaps have charged me a fee beyond my cleaning if they'd been aware, but the lessons are there if we will heed them.

Lesson 1: There are times to open your mouth

This might seem too obvious to mention, but it is surprising how often leaders keep their mouths shut at key moments. In my dentist's chair I hesitate to "open wider" because: a) I am not a fan of pain; b) I am afraid that it will lead to finding more things wrong; and c) I wonder deep inside if my hygienist might not just really enjoy inflicting suffering upon me because I don't floss regularly. In leadership we may hesitate to open our mouths for similar reasons. We are not fans of pain, and sometimes we may think it is just easier to let things go than confront them. When those "things", are broken organizational values or patterns of poor performance, however, it is imperative that we open our mouths or risk loss of organizational morale.

At other times we may hesitate to open our mouths because of the "elephant" in the room, and our fear that naming it will open a flood of other issues which we do not yet feel prepared to face. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes that "Leadership is...about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted"(Collins, p. 74). If we are to be leaders who would gain the respect and loyalty of our organizations we must be willing to open our mouths and speak to the issues that others hesitate to name.

Still other times our hesitation might be due to fear that the person to whom we must speak will seek some sort of retribution or attempt to damage us organizationally, finding some flaw in our own humanity, which is certainly possible. If, however, we have another of the qualities that Collins finds to be key, a "compelling modesty", we will be ready to own up to our failings while still calling ourselves and others to appropriate performance. We will have the courage that brings consistency – a consistency of speaking truth where it needs to be spoken regardless of the response. All too often it is the soft-spoken and milder team members who take most of the criticism, because we know they won't respond in a strongly negative fashion. Good leaders know when to open their mouths and they don't let fear of reprisal or negative response get in the way.

Lesson 2: There are times to close your mouth

While the normal instruction at the dentist's office is "open wider", there are the times when I am told to "close" or "bite down on this". Times when it is necessary for the mouth to be closed for progress to be made; this is also true in the workplace. There are times when we lead best from a position of quiet, when we need to "bite down on this". For me, one of those "bite down" times is when I am first approached with a new concept, idea, or request by a team member. This is instead of giving way to my tendency to quickly see possible problems or issues and lead with objections. "Biting Down" ensures that I listen better, hear out the full idea, affirm the innovation and motivation driving it and encourage and empower staff. I want to empower my staff members and let them know the trust I have in their professionalism and skills. Sometimes I do this by "opening" and telling them, but other times by "closing", to let them have the floor.

Another time for keeping my mouth closed is in meetings when we are discussing options or possible solutions to an issue. A tendency of mine, for which I have learned to keep an eye out, is to start the discussion with the solution I like. This not only shuts down innovation, it tends to polarize the group around those who agree and those who disagree, and of course it is then only the very brave who would openly disagree. If I raise the issue, then “bite down” we have far more productive discussions with many more options from which to develop the best solution. Similarly, in meetings I try to refrain from stepping in to the discussion beyond inviting other members to give input. This “closure” ensures that I am not inadvertently shutting down discussion before everyone has had opportunity to express their view.

Lesson 3: Prevention is key

Ah, now we’re back to the flossing, and brushing, and regular check-ups. We all know that it is far better to prevent cavities and decay than to have to treat them, and yet still we struggle to floss. Preventive measures often require lots of discipline, because it is easier to let things slide until there is a crisis. The problem with this approach is that each crisis caused by a lack of leadership erodes the respect and engagement of our teams. While there are any number of activities that could be placed in the prevention category I will look at three that have been significant in my own leadership journey.

Frequent feedback prevents resentment

The Gallup organization did a massive study on employee engagement, and found that one of the key factors that fosters engagement is frequent feedback. The question that they used was: “In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?” (Buckingham, p. 28). Seven days! I have to give positive feedback to each of my staff every week? Try asking your dentist, “I’m supposed to brush my teeth every day?”. Employees who receive regular recognition are more engaged and more motivated to continue to do good work another week. Even those of us who believe we give our best for the pure intrinsic value still like the occasional pat on the back, don’t we? As leaders we may ask how we can afford the time to do that. One answer is that we can pull it from the time we **won’t** be spending on recruitment and selection to replace employees who become resentful and leave the organization because they feel their efforts are overlooked!

Direct communication prevents unresolved conflict

Stop for a second and reflect on the interpersonal conflicts of which everyone on your team is aware but which no one mentions or acknowledges organizationally. Perhaps it is two staff members who won’t talk to one another. Maybe there is a rivalry that has gone beyond normal boundaries. We are human and we will, on occasion, do something to annoy or offend our team members and fellow workers. The issue is not whether we ever say or do the wrong thing, the issue is whether we deal with it as quickly and directly as possible.

There are a couple things we as leaders can do that will promote this. The first is to practice it! We must be quick and direct whenever we have issues with staff, or if we hear that staff have issues with us. If we hear about an issue secondhand we must deal not only with the issue, but with the fact that they did not come to you first. Another means of encouraging direct communication is to require it – that is, when a staff member comes to you to lodge a complaint about another team member, have them first speak directly to that individual to attempt resolution before allowing them to bring it to you. There may be rare occasions where the

context will not allow that to happen, in most cases that is the best next step. It encourages an open, honest, up front approach which is the best means of preventing long term problems.

Good outcomes and measures prevent confusion

Another of the important questions the Gallup organization discovered that was significantly related to engagement was this: "Do I know what is expected of me at work"? It seems fairly straightforward, but expectations involve more than just knowing generally the areas for which you're responsible. Knowing what is expected involves a good job description, clear outcomes, equally clear measures for determining the success of those outcomes, and then measuring and giving feedback. The only one of these that can actually be missing and still have clear expectations is, perhaps surprisingly, the job description! That is because if the outcomes are clear I know my responsibilities even without a job description. But if I don't know the outcomes, or don't know how they will be measured, or don't have the information of how I am doing against the measures, or if the measures aren't actually ever measured, then I cannot know what is expected of me. It's often the actual measuring that is lacking, because regular measurement takes a level of discipline that is akin to flossing regularly! Good measurement requires a focused discipline and attention to details to which many leaders are unwilling to commit. Without it, we open ourselves to performance and productivity issues down the road, which will require far more intervention than if we create good outcomes and measures up front.

That's it. Open. Close. Preventive measures. Good for tooth care; good for leadership. 9 out of 10 leaders agree!

Written by Jerry Colwell, CHRP
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Director of Client Services
Pathways Skill Development
For more information:
jerry@pathways.on.ca
519-667-7795

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