

## The truth, the whole truth...

THAT'S WHAT'S MISSING IN MANY ORGANIZATIONS, WRITES CONSULTANT LYNN HARRIS, WHO IDENTIFIES THREE UNDERLYING CAUSES FOR THE LACK OF CANDOUR, AND SOME STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM



Jack Welch called it "the biggest dirty little secret in business."

The former chief executive officer of General Electric Co. wasn't referring to insider trading or golden handshakes. Rather, it was the lack of truthfulness that pervades workplaces. "Lack of candour," he writes, "basically blocks smart ideas, fast action, and good people contributing all the stuff they've got. It's a killer."

He's not alone in this observation. In their book, *The Managerial Moment of Truth*, Bruce Bodaken, CEO of Blue Shield of California, and Robert Fritz, a management consultant, write: "Truth is one of the most important competitive advantages there is in building a business. Truth is the most vital element an organization has in fostering collective learning. When we are able to explore and then tell each other the truth, we can improve performance, both individually and collectively."

Indeed, according to Mr. Welch, Mr. Bodaken and Mr. Fritz, authentic and honest internal communication results in better, faster decisions and actions. It also builds a culture of trust and collaboration, where opposing views are debated and more effective solutions and innovations are created.

In reality, however, there is a distinct lack of truth-telling inside most companies. In my work with executives, I have heard many stories describing the avoidance of sincerity and openness in all types of situations. This is coupled with their frustrated desire to work in an honest and trusting environment. This is not about malevolent dishonesty. No one goes to work thinking: "I'm going to hinder my own and my company's performance by withholding the truth from my colleagues." It's the many moments each day when we think one thing but say something different. Or we say what we think others want to hear. Or we have an idea that may be of value, but hold back.

Being more upfront with colleagues could foster an atmosphere that boosts speed, efficiency, collaboration and trust. Ignoring it is likely to put you at a serious disadvantage in realizing the full potential of your organization. As Mr. Bodaken and Mr. Fritz write: "Imagine trying to build an organization without the ability to tell each other the truth. We would not be able to correct mistakes, learn from past performances, adjust our processes, and better understand the reality in which we are engaged."

But what's the real possibility of changing behaviours -- at individual, team and whole organization levels -- so that candour rules? At GE, Mr. Welch says it took close to a decade to foster candour so that it was applied as a matter of course -- and even then it was by no means universal. It can be done -- but it's not easy because there are good reasons why we sometimes withhold the truth. Here are three fundamental underlying causes, and strategies for overcoming them:

## **1 Socialization**

We are socialized from childhood to be polite, and try to manage how other people feel. The code of conduct that goes with politeness demands we lie to avoid the possibility of hurting someone's feelings. Say someone sends you a sweater for your birthday that doesn't fit or is the wrong colour. Rather than saying that, we are socialized into lying about how lovely it is, and just what we wanted. This is a trivial example, to be sure -- but we are brought up with hundreds of such trivial examples that socialize us into automatically withholding the truth.

How we are socialized in childhood strongly influences how we behave as adults at work. An all-too-common example: The whole truth is rarely told in performance appraisals because we think the other person somehow can't take it. This is not to suggest we should go through life blurting out the truth at every opportunity. But we do need to re-examine some of our assumptions and conventions around truth-telling to build trust.

Instead of mindlessly abiding by them, try challenging them to see if they really hold up: Will the other person really be unable to cope with the plain facts, or are they a grown-up and capable of dealing with all sorts of challenging situations in their life? A good test is to ask yourself: "If it were me, would I want the truth and would I be able to take it?" If the answer is yes, it is also likely to be true for people you work with.

## **2 Fear**

If you are working in a highly political culture, with people you don't trust, fear of being punished for speaking out could deter you from being honest. (You might also ask yourself how much longer you want to work in such a culture.) For most people, the fear is about the imagined negative impact: Not only might we provoke conflict or anguish, but we might be perceived as abrasive, socially unskilled or just plain weird.

One thing's for sure: In an environment where truth-telling is not the norm, you would certainly stand out by speaking frankly.

Many of us would prefer to keep our head down rather than become a target. But often, there is a lot of fantasy around the imagined negative consequences of telling others the truth. When we feel uncomfortable and don't know what will happen, we imagine the worst. But these fears are usually out of proportion with what actually transpires.

It's important to work out when fears are grounded in reality and you need to behave carefully and strategically, and when fears are imaginary, and simply blocking effective communication with colleagues. Decide if you really want to withhold the truth based on imaginary negative consequences that might never happen, or simply go for the truth and let the chips fall where they may.

And decide whether it is more important to feel comfortable by being less than candid, or to tell the truth. In most professional situations, you are likely to conclude that truth wins over comfort.

### 3 Skills

In an ideal world, just telling the truth would be enough. It wouldn't matter that we might deliver our message clumsily or fail to manage the response as well as we might have liked. However, in the real world, where we need to develop long-term, trusting relationships with colleagues, good intentions are not enough. It's important to develop the skills throughout your organization for giving an honest message that has a constructive result.

Truth-telling is not an excuse for a verbal mugging. If you want the truth to be effective, be clear and open about the positive outcomes you want. Explain your motivation to others about why it's important to have a potentially difficult conversation and address the issue directly, without pussy-footing around.

Check the accuracy of any assumptions you are making about the person or the situation, and be prepared to reassess that based on any new information. Make sure you tell the truth based on real evidence, rather than opinions or how something made you feel. And, because honesty is a key leadership behaviour, model truth from the top down.

As Mr. Welch says: "There is nothing scientific about the process: To get candour, you reward it, praise it, and talk about it. You make public heroes out of people who demonstrate it. Most of all, you yourself demonstrate it in an exuberant and even exaggerated way -- even when you're not the boss."

## **Tips for Telling It Like It Is**

### **Management:**

1. Before trying to change anything, understand the dynamics that cause people to withhold the truth.
2. Train people to communicate with evidence and facts, rather than conjecture.
3. Demonstrate honesty and plain-speaking, starting with senior management.
4. Talk up the advantages and successes of truth-telling and let everyone know it is expected and valued.

### **Individuals:**

1. Consider and evaluate what the consequences would be if you spoke candidly. Are they grounded in reality?
2. Speaking the truth requires knowing the truth. Get your facts straight before addressing any situation.
3. Expect to feel uncomfortable. Often truth-telling creates short-term discomfort for you and others, but over the longer term, it creates better relationships and results.
4. Use straightforward language and check the impact of what you have said with the recipients.
5. Address situations with the truth early, when issues are relatively small, rather than letting them fester into a full-blown confrontation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, Lynn, Article in the Globe and Mail Careers Section. [www.harriscoach.com](http://www.harriscoach.com) Lynn Harris is an executive coach and organizational development consultant based in Montreal.