

How Leaders Can Create More Openness and Transparency

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Transparency is fast becoming the expected norm in business, and expectations are growing. More openness and transparency has great benefits and there are also consequences involved with not creating a high level of openness. If you already have a good level of openness then strive for more. As we move towards the year 2020 openness in leadership will need to increase even further. It is only going to become more critical.

Stakeholders expect businesses and leaders to be up front and open about things – and when they are not, and something bad happens, the reputation can be irreparably damaged in no time. Car giant VW's recently exposed non-transparent emissions tests are a strong example of this.

Starts at the top

Personal openness starts at the top, the more senior you are the more responsibility you have to role model being open. Team members watch for this and emulate what leaders and colleagues do. It's natural, we role model each other's behaviour, good or bad. When it is done well it can have an excellent positive effect throughout the team and organisation.

Ask yourself these questions:

- How open is your team? How much do you demonstrate that you want to hear open and honest views from others?
- How do you react when people open up to you? Even if you don't like what they are saying?
- How open are you with other team members? What stops you and what encourages you?
- How are you rewarding transparency? Personally and as a team?

Why

So why would we not be transparent and open...

Sometimes we don't dare to tell the truth. A fear of "back lash" can stop people from telling the truth. Or we withhold information as we may think that others can't handle it, if we have previously observed a time when they didn't handle it well for example. Or if we don't feel heard, if we feel that our views are not being listened to, then we stop providing that input.

If we avoid going directly to the person and go elsewhere to share our views it becomes gossip. The act of talking behind people's backs is gossip, plain and simple. It makes others suspicious about when they will be talked about like that. A culture of gossip is then born.

In an increasingly global workplace different regional/national cultures can have differing views on transparency. In some cultures it is just not the norm to be truly open. In this perceived cultural minefield it can make people uncertain and hesitant to share until they have worked out the rules.

6 simple and effective practical steps

So take some simple steps to increase levels of openness.

1. Start to reward transparency- when you notice someone is being open and authentic about it then reward that behaviour to encourage others to do the same
2. Tell the truth – demonstrate courage by telling the truth. It sounds simple but is not always easy, but it's needed and it demonstrates great integrity
3. Actively reach out to your stakeholders- ask yourself: what do our stakeholders need us to be transparent about?
4. Transparently answer a question- in times of change it may not be possible to have the answer or be able to communicate it yet. Use these 4 principles when answering questions:

- Answer the Question
- If you don't know the answer, say so
- If you cannot answer the question now, make a commitment for when you can and honour it
- If you know the answer but cannot say now then say so and make a commitment to share when you can

5. Have a value of transparency – an organisation has a number of values that make up the culture. One should be openness and transparency. Then clarify what that actually means for you personally and as a team

6. Make it mandatory - what is measured gets done, so if you want people to be transparent put it into their goals. Find the links, help people see the impact of the WHAT and the HOW of transparency. Ultimately it is not what you do but how you do it that counts the most when it comes to transparency.

Behaviours

Demonstrate behaviours that match these actions to create transparency. You need to show courage, listen, take responsibility, be interested, be thoughtful and be conscientious to get to real transparency. Take a healthy dose of optimism too, trusting that it will have a great impact makes all the difference.

By Mandy Flint and Elisabet Vinberg Hearn

Their new book "Leading Teams – 10 Challenges: 10 Solutions" published by the FT is out now it explores conflict in great depth. You can buy it on Amazon now and in all major WHSmith travel outlets. See www.leadingteamsbook.com for more information.

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