



LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: ALWAYS HAVE A DOOR OPEN FOR UPWARD FEEDBACK

I read an article many years ago—it might have been in the *Wall Street Journal* but I'm not sure. What sticks with me is the headline: "Ignorance at the Top." That is a startling and somewhat counterintuitive concept. Unfortunately, it is not inaccurate. If CEOs and other senior executives do not have access to upward feedback, they run the risk of living in an information bubble. Depending on their own organizational culture, they might hear only the "good news," highly filtered and possibly fallacious. You don't want that.

If there is something dysfunctional in your organization that is harming morale, impacting performance, decreasing retention, or causing any negative outcome, people need to know how to bring it forward. First, they need to know that they *can* bring it forward. Do your employees know what the appropriate channels are? People would not resort to whistleblowing if they were guided in the first place to someone who would hear their complaints and take action.

What else might you not be hearing? Feedback? Innovative ideas? It is not just dysfunction that is of interest to senior leaders. It is empowering and motivating to be heard...and beneficial to management. What you hear may lead to retention of top talent, improvements in the organizational climate and/or results.

Here are 8 ways to ensure you have open lines of communication:

1. Ensure all senior leaders give everyone a "permission slip" to speak. Let people know that you are open to hearing **all** significant messages about the organization and all feedback. Lead by example.
2. Do not retaliate against anyone who has the courage to bring you a message that is hard to hear. Reward that behavior.
3. Invite feedback with open-ended questions. How am I doing? What can we do better? What do I need to know? What are we not talking about?
4. Set up team sessions between the C-suite and the next layer of management to hold discussions asking the questions listed in #3 above, and then cascade. We at EXCN have helped many organizations do this. It is highly effective in opening up dialogue amongst layers.
5. Ensure there is no fear in the organization. Model the values of fairness, equity, honesty, openness, and trust. Model values that keep communication flowing.
6. Model vulnerability as a tool to build trust and encourage openness. Again, lead by example.
7. Consider creating a position for an organizational ombudsman – a confidential, neutral, independent professional who helps employees resolve any work-related concern. The ombudsman can bring messages forward that are perceived to be risky for individuals to bring forward themselves, or they can coach individuals to speak up on their own behalf.
8. Institute a hotline that people can call anonymously.

Are you hearing all the key messages that you need to hear from your workforce? Do you feel free to raise your own concerns with other leaders in your organization?

Further reading

[Good Communication Goes Beyond Open Door Policies | hbr.org](https://hbr.org)
[What Happens When an Employee Calls the Ombudsman? | hbr.org](https://hbr.org)
[Why CEOs Should Model Vulnerability | hbr.org](https://hbr.org)
[You Might Not Be Hearing Your Team's Best Ideas | hbr.org](https://hbr.org)