

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: GENUINE LISTENING

Because upward feedback is such an integral part of our work, it is always painful to hear about catastrophes that leave behind them a trail of unheeded warnings. We see in our work how much chaos can be averted when executives genuinely listen and take colleagues' views into account before making decisions. Executives who are open to input from others can avoid so much negativity and can position themselves optimally for any circumstances. Some disasters are unavoidable. But when trouble hits, you don't want to find out that your most valued people have been trying to tell you about impending doom.

The importance of listening, particularly for top management (where there are often real communication barriers) cannot be overstated. We may not be privy to the business decisions that led up to a disaster, but what we do know absolutely is that listening genuinely and openly to feedback is one of the keys to crisis management.

This is why psychological safety must be part of the corporate culture. Leaders who genuinely listen nurture an organization's psychological safety. Our premise is that companies run by leaders with the wisdom to listen are the ones that thrive. See our April 2022 [Leadership Effectiveness tip: Psychological Safety | Executive Coaching Network](#).

Several incidences leap to mind where disaster resulted from not listening. Boeing employees knew about the serious 737 Max problems. [NASA and Morton Thiokol were warned before the Shuttle disaster](#). There was Harry Markopolos, whose warnings about the Madoff Ponzi Scheme (well documented in his book *No One Would Listen: A True Financial Thriller*) were ignored by the SEC. And now the world is hearing about Southwest employees' concerns—even union concerns—that couldn't get through to the C-Suite.

Forbes reported in a recent article, [Crisis Management Lessons From Southwest Airlines' Meltdown \(forbes.com\)](#), that crews' concerns about the scheduling system were apparently ignored. The article ends with these wise words: "As a leader, you have to be willing to implement when employees and staff are giving consistent feedback regarding the resources and tools necessary for them to do their jobs."

Here are five steps we recommend:

1. Listen to employees when they express concerns. Take frontline observations seriously.
2. Make sure your communications channels are open and well known to the employee population.
3. Ensure there is no retaliation when an employee brings up an issue that needs remedy.
4. If an employee is wrong about a concern, don't punish the good faith effort on the employee's part to want to make things better. Rather, acknowledge their courage in bringing forward the concern. This is crucial to psychological safety.
5. Recognize and act on your obligations to care for employees who may be dealing with irate customers—and also care for those customers.

It's amazing how quickly a company can go from being an industry model to near demise. And it happens fast. Much can go wrong if leadership fails to listen and takes a wrong turn as a result.

Can people you rely on tell you what they think you need to know? What steps can you take to ensure your corporate culture is one of psychological safety.

Further Reading

- [What Boeing Has Taught Us About Not Neglecting Company Culture \(forbes.com\)](#)
- [Engineer who refused to approve Challenger launch dies in Ogden \(kslnnewsradio.com\)](#)
- [Enron Scandal: The Fall of a Wall Street Darling \(investopedia.com\)](#)