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## LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: SAY NO TO YES-PEOPLE AND YES TO CANDOR

"Think not those faithful who praise thy words and actions, but those who kindly reprove thy faults." That was Socrates in about 400 B.C. In other words, yes-people have been around for a long time. They were not helpful then; they are not helpful now.

Yes-people do not challenge up. They don't rock the boat. They do what is asked. They don't question whether or not what is being asked of them is core to the organization's long-term vision, mission, and values.

To compound the "yes-people problem," leaders often intentionally—and more frequently unintentionally—create environments where people are not encouraged to speak the truth. As a result, the tough messages leaders sometimes need to hear are not communicated. This is a complex and important situation which leaders need to watch out for and guard against.

### The Best Leaders

Leaders are more effective when people in their organization trust that it is safe to speak the truth, raise issues, and highlight ways to do things better. The best leaders challenge people to speak with rigor, honesty, transparency, and confidence. They reward direct reports for being critical, direct, and "disagreeable"—for telling it like it is. Great leaders seek out and reward people who challenge, innovate, and question.

Leaders can create a climate of comfort for themselves simply by moving yes-people into their inner circle. In this way, they avoid challenge, conflict, and people who are direct with them. And they lock themselves into a tower where the emperor has no clothes.

As an executive coach, my job is to help leaders see that *they often and quite unintentionally*, create environments where other people can't tell them tough messages. When that starts to happen, organizations often end up in distress.

### The Cost if You Don't Hear the Tough Messages

Many industries suffer from environments that stifle communication—some with more severe consequences than others. For instance, the aviation industry used to be one where there was an emperor who had no clothes, but the yes-people sometimes failed to mention that. In the 1977 Tenerife airport disaster—still the most deadly in aviation history—the cockpit crew functioned as yes-people with their senior leader. The crew failed to push back adequately to the senior pilot who was not communicating clearly to air traffic control. The result was a crash between a Pan Am 747 and a KLM 747 on a foggy runway. "Perhaps because of the KLM pilot's very senior position, *neither the copilot nor flight engineer question[ed] the pilot again...*" ([Final Eight Minutes](#)).

The good news for those of us who fly a lot is that, since these events occurred, the aviation industry has worked very hard to eradicate the kind of culture that fostered yes-people. The industry has accomplished this through "[Crew Resource Management](#)" which grew out of the Tenerife disaster—training that focuses on human factors in the cockpit: interpersonal communication (transparency), leadership, and decision-making. The excellent *Harvard Business Review* article, O'Toole and Bennis's [A Culture of Candor](#) uses examples from the aviation

industry and the work NASA did on human factors to illuminate their thesis that corporations must foster transparency in order to be “*economically, ethically, and socially sustainable.*”

Whether you are in a high stakes industry or a fast-paced e-commerce environment or not, you want people who are going to cleanly evaluate a situation and give their honest opinion. In the absence of an employee’s direct honest assessment, the outcome can be catastrophic to public health, individual life and limb, reputation, financial results, and more.

### **Four Ways to Improve Candor**

1. Look at your own behavior—consider participating in a 360 or other assessment ... or you could just ask people. And ask yourself, do you encourage people to challenge you or bring you the bad news?
2. Encourage (reward) those who speak out and challenge up—even *if they are annoying.*
3. Help those who are reluctant to challenge up learn the value of stepping outside their comfort zones for the good of the organization.
4. Cascade an open culture by ensuring your direct reports are fostering open communication in their groups/teams.

*Are you setting the stage so that people in your organization tell you the good, the bad, and the ugly? How would you know? If you are not setting the stage for transparency, what do you need to do so that you hear what it is you need to hear?*