LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: THE COURAGE OF CANDOR

One of the hardest things to do in most organizations is "to speak truth to power." Warren Bennis and James O'Toole in their excellent article, "What's Needed Next: A Culture of Candor" (HBR, June 2009), argue for both the inevitability and the criticality of transparency in an organization. "Inevitability" has to do with the impossibility of secrets in the internet age. "Criticality" has to do with the impact of transparency on performance, from the basics of keeping the plane from crashing or the patient from dying, to beating the competition, doubling profitability, or being the leader in innovation.

Let's take a look at some positive outcomes of a recent process we did with an executive team ("ET") and their direct reports that was designed to provide a safe environment for open communication, particularly "upward transparency."

Bennis and O'Toole say: "What [some leaders] fail to understand is that trust is a symbiotic relationship: Leaders first must trust others before others will trust them." When we suggested to the executive team that all of their direct reports take a survey about the ET's effectiveness in leading the organization, and then have some of them attend the ET offsite to provide feedback face to face, the ET did not all immediately jump at the chance. But they took a deep breath, and made the courageous leap to "trust first." Specifically, they signed off on having more than 100 people at the next organizational tier take the survey, and a random sample of eight direct reports attend their meeting.

How did the direct reports feel about facing the ET with their feedback? About the same as the ET felt. Bennis and O'Toole use the word "terror" in relation to giving upward feedback: "Those lower down the pecking order may experience, from time to time, the terror involved in having to tell unpalatable truths to those above them." The direct report delegates (DRDs) were not unique, then, as they spoke about ascending the "tower of terror" riding the elevator up to the ET meeting.

What happened? Ultimately, over two days the two groups of executives spent about 8 hours together. Open dialogue took place. Surprise was voiced. All participated in a problem-solving exercise to lay strategic groundwork. Commitments were made and communication lines were opened.

After the sessions, we asked the ET and DRDs how it went. Here are some of the actual responses to the post-meeting survey.

What did you find valuable about the recent ET meeting?

- Candor about the real issues, connection, and feedback from direct reports.
- Other than the opportunity which was enormous—candor around very tough issues. It takes a great deal of strength to be so open to feedback on sensitive topics.
- The whole process was valuable, and it demonstrated to the organization the ET's willingness to reflect and learn. From a personal perspective, I appreciated the chance to interact with members of the ET outside of the context of a traditional HQ presentation.
- The chance to have an intimate conversation with leadership in a "safe environment." I was able to gain new perspective about my leaders as "people."

What is the single most important outcome of the meeting in your opinion?

- The permission granted by our DRDs for the ET to become a true leadership team, not just a management team, and to direct the future of the organization.
- From an overall direct report's perspective I am able to communicate with conviction the fact that our leadership is open to constructive feedback and truly interested in providing the type of leadership we need to succeed. A personal outcome for me is that I gained confidence in interacting with ET members because they truly made me feel valued during our time together and I look forward to bringing that enhanced confidence into future meetings with them … especially when I have to communicate with them as a group.
- I think the ET appreciated the feedback from the delegates. That perspective as well as the positive message the delegates have taken to their peers is really powerful.

What are you doing to create a safe environment for upward feedback—speaking truth to power—in your organization? Are you leading your organization to realize the full value of transparency?