



LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: EXECUTIVE ISOLATION

One of my favorite headlines of the last decade and a half is from the *New York Times*, published on March 3, 2002, [Another Quality of the Corporate Titan: Ignorance at the Top](#). The article is memorable, not because it talks about an aspiration that any executive coach would promote, but rather, because it is a cautionary tale of exactly what you, as a senior leader of people, do *not* want to have happen.

The article focused on an extreme of bad behavior (remember Enron?) and the usual question about who knew what when. The continuum of actual or perceived corporate bad behavior runs the gamut; it includes turf-protection, harassment, discrimination, poor business judgment and execution thereof, disrespect, rudeness, and lack of communication.

Those are a handful of examples. Why doesn't someone say something? It is certainly not that these behaviors go unnoticed. Ask anyone.

We have written before about the need for a culture of candor in any organization, and [the courage of candor](#). Your responsibility as a leader is to make it okay for people to tell you anything, particularly to challenge your ideas and even your behaviors. A recent HBR article called [Make it OK for Employees to Challenge Your Ideas](#) begs the question - what are the consequences of only wanting to hear good news. The short answer is somewhere between "isolation" and "ignorance at the top."

What are the warning signals that you are not hearing what you should be hearing?

- The news that is brought to you is unfailingly rosy.
- You hear things like, "Why should I give him feedback? No one else is." (You would hear that about others of course, not yourself.)
- Bad behavior of certain people goes on for years, if not decades.
- In meetings, you never see heads shaking side to side, they only nod up and down.

Some of the things you can begin to role-model in your organization . . .

- Openly invite input and feedback and do not shoot the messenger.
- Be sure to seriously listen to, take in, consider, and respond to any feedback. For example, if it is about business operations, say something like, "What a great idea! Let's try it." Or you might say, "That is a great idea. I have given it serious consideration and this is why I think it won't work" If the feedback is behavioral: "Thank you for the feedback. Please let me know right away when you see that behavior again — I would like to make some changes." Sometimes an apology might be in order.
- Recognize in an affirmative way when someone has the courage to raise a sensitive issue with you. If that recognition can be communicated broadly, all the better.
- Find appropriate moments to poke fun at yourself. Use it to show others that you are aware of your shortcomings, and that you are trying to work on them.

What internal dialogues are you having about people in your organization that you should be sharing? How can you begin to shift the culture in your organization so that people speak up at the right time to the “right” person?