Communicating with Courage and Candor

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Communication is one of the most important and often underutilized business tools. For both individuals and organizations, communicating with purpose, candor, courage and sensitivity is a powerful skill and yields a competitive advantage. So why is it so difficult?

Vital to organizations – but rare

There is widespread agreement in the business and academic communities that transparent communication is important to both organizations and individuals. Professors Jackie Hartman and Jim McCambridge cite studies demonstrating that good communication in companies correlates with higher a return on sales, better employee retention, and increased productivity, and that good communication skills in individuals correlates positively with career success. ¹

Legendary leader Jack Welch, in his book Winning² complains that candor is the “biggest dirty little secret” in business, underestimated in both its rarity and importance. Welch says that lack of candor and its symptomatic behaviors such as withholding bad news, hoarding information, and neglecting to raise questions “blocks smart ideas, fast actions and good people contributing all the stuff they’ve got.” Conversely, a culture of candor involves more people in idea generation and evaluation, increasing richness of ideas and the speed at which they can be debated, improved on, decided, and implemented.

Writing in the Harvard Business Review³, Professors James O’Toole and Warren Bennis agree that the cost of lack of candor in organizations is high, citing examples ranging from airline accidents to corporate scandals as emanating ultimately from lack of transparency, leaders who won’t listen, hoarding of information, subordinates lacking the courage to speak up, and “group think” dominating within organizations.

Important to individuals – but risky

For an organization to embrace a culture of open communication, its leaders and employees must model candor and courage in their communications, a skill that is indispensable in future leaders. According to Kevin Sensenig, VP of Organization Development at Dale Carnegie & Associates, communication is the thread that holds all the essential leadership skills together. ⁴ In their book Global

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Leadership, thought leaders Marshall Goldsmith, Cathy Greenberg, Alastair Robertson and Maya Hu-Chan demonstrate their agreement by weaving communication skills throughout their descriptions of all fifteen dimensions of the effective global leader while focusing on “encouraging constructive dialogue” as one of them.\(^5\)

And yet, according to most thought leaders, even though it is widely recognized as important, demonstration of transparent, courageous communication is rare in organizations and the people who populate them. The very fact that it was necessary to provide legal protection for whistleblowers shows how risky to one’s career speaking up can be.

**Essential communication skills**

Employers often seek good communication skills in job candidates. Writing, grammar, pronunciation, organization, conveying information, presentation, instruction-giving, interpersonal communication and negotiating are some of the elements defined as communication skills, all of which can be learned and honed, but none of which really explain the extra edge needed in tomorrow’s leaders. An element that is growing in importance is the ability to communicate across cultures and generations. The trickier elements of communication are associated with candor and courage and more rarely seen: expressing disagreement without causing defensiveness, influencing without overwhelming, bringing bad news, criticizing constructively, and listening without judging.

**Why is it so hard?**

Candid communication goes against human nature in that it often requires one to say things that make others uncomfortable, thus risking damage to one’s reputation and relationships, not to mention one’s career. According to Welch, it is just easier not to speak one’s mind than to have to take the time to deal with the hurt, anger, pain and confusion that is potentially generated when communicating candidly.

Another reason that transparent communication is rare is that sharing information candidly goes against our competitive instincts and the association of information with power, according to Bennis and O’Toole. Speaking uncomfortable truths to those who hold the power is risky and requires both courage on the part of the speaker and willingness to hear on the part of the listener. Often, leaders are unaware of the barriers they put up to their subordinates. For all Jack Welch’s claims about the importance of candor, Bennis and O’Toole report that former employees claimed that he conducted meetings so aggressively that they were intimidated by his “criticizing, demeaning, ridiculing, humiliating.”

So what can be done about this dilemma?

Welch’s own advice is that open dialogue can start anywhere, so employees at all levels should risk speaking with candor, while managers and leaders should model and reward it. Here are some tips and tools that aspiring courageous communicators can use.

Be solution-oriented

David Antonini, writing for the journal Industrial Management, urges those facing communication challenges to begin by caring enough to resist the temptation to agree when facing your adversary and then undermine or complain to a third party. It is often easier to find fault than to seek a mutually acceptable solution to an issue.

Candor in communication is easier where there is already trust and respect, a responsibility that is shared among all parties in a relationship. Candor means being trustworthy, sincere and straightforward, but it doesn’t mean barging ahead to speak your piece without consideration or a plan for how to do it gracefully.

Listen

One of the simplest, though not the easiest, of under-used communication skills is listening. We often forget that communication is a two-way street, with listening at least as important as transmitting. To listen well, one must invite feedback while setting aside one’s own assumptions, suspending judgment, and seeking to fully understand the other person’s point of view. Resist the temptation to spend the time when the other person is talking to formulate your own response. It isn’t necessary to respond immediately – ask questions to draw out the thought process and the assumptions behind the other person’s point of view; then take time to consider and formulate your response.

Know and flex your style

Hartman and McCambridge point out that people vary in their preferred style of giving and receiving information. Communication styles range across continua of assertiveness-responsiveness, pace (fast-slow) and the priority given to people vs. task. There is no single best communication style, but most people are quickest to respond to those who communicate in their own style. Increasing awareness of your own and others’ communication styles can help you modify your style to increase the comfort of the other party and thus enhance communication.

When planning a candid discussion with your manager or anyone else, Antonioni advises not to assume the other person knows more than you do, even if he is the manager. Begin by using listening skills to understand the other person’s frame of reference – what is important to him. Then reframe the issue in a way that helps the other person view it differently, presenting information and asking questions to help him broaden his view.

Practice makes perfect

Training in communication skills such as active listening, reflection, ladders of inference, style flexing, negotiation, and written and verbal communication is useful in preparing yourself to communicate with candor and courage. Gordon Mills and Wayne Pace, in a study conducted on 211 subjects, found that

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both practice and feedback increased proficiency in interpersonal communication skills. Role playing in a nonthreatening environment will help you build and retain these skills for everyday use as well as when a critical moment or crisis arises.

Caution!

Some common pitfalls to avoid include:

- Becoming defensive or reacting negatively when the other person becomes defensive. Using the tips described above will tend to reduce defensiveness, but if it pops up, defuse emotions by focusing on the issue rather than on personalities. If necessary, call a pause until you can regroup and reframe.
- Disregarding nonverbal communication which can contradict verbal communication. Be aware of defensive or aggressive postures on your own part, and watch for nonverbal clues to what the other person is feeling.
- Overuse of technology-driven communication which can unintentionally distort meaning. Candid communication is best done face-to-face.

Count the cost

No matter the amount of skill and practice, speaking candidly is difficult and speaking truth to power more difficult still. When you are the possessor of an important message that is risky to communicate, you have choices – walking away from the organization, surface loyalty – i.e., keeping your mouth shut, or real loyalty – speaking up wisely with candor, courage and commitment. We need more real loyalty.

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