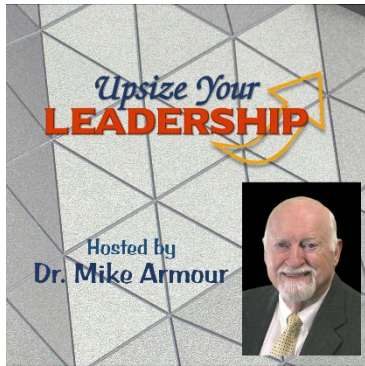


Instilling a Truth-Telling Culture

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Thirty years ago, my friend Juanell Teague established herself as one of the nation's foremost consultants for professional speakers. She also became known for her personal motto which she tagged to the signature of her emails. It said simply, "Tell the truth quicker, faster." She had learned that truth postponed is improvement delayed. So long as we skirt the truth or avoid its unpleasant implications, we are reduced to a game of pretense and half-truths that dilute or even destroy effectiveness.

If organizations are to achieve high performance, they can afford nothing less than a culture of truth. Peak performance in any organization demands free-flowing feedback loops. To stay ahead of the pack, we must tell the truth quicker, faster. Instilling a culture of truth in the team or organization you lead is a sure way to Upsize Your Leadership.

As an essential for building trust in our leadership, truth ranks second only to integrity. Integrity, of course, implies telling the truth. But the kind of truth which builds thorough trust goes beyond the simple but sometimes difficult task of being honest in what we say.

To build genuine, effective trust we must be equally willing to hear the truth. To confront the truth. To keep the organization and its culture grounded in truth and reality.

People come to trust you as a leader by watching you in action. They especially watch to see if you tell the truth. Consistently. Openly. Even when the truth is unpleasant. Even when truth puts you in a bad light.

There are dozens of ways to be untruthful. The most obvious one is lying. Others are more subtle and don't tend to be classified in the same category as overt dishonesty or deception. But they are equally damaging to a culture of truth. Some of the more common culprits are:

- telling a half-truth
- exaggerating personal accomplishments
- taking undue credit
- projecting a false image of being "in the know" or being well-connected in prestigious circles
- letting misrepresentations go unchallenged

- using spin to distort the facts
- word-smithing to hide details that are unflattering, unpleasant, or potentially discrediting
- purposefully leaving false impressions
- making promises without a genuine commitment to fulfill them
- blaming others to avoid personal scrutiny
- using vague language to invite erroneous conclusions

You can doubtlessly add other items to this list. The common denominator in all of them is knowingly separating what we communicate from an accurate portrayal of reality.

Interestingly, when I present this list of culprits as trust-busting behavior, I'm no longer surprised to spark a disagreement. Some people will insist that "spin" and words carefully chosen to blur or mask the truth are simply shrewd and savvy techniques for achieving your objective. In other words, unless a statement is blatantly deceptive, it's not a violation of truth.

This narrow definition of truth-telling is a natural outgrowth of trends in popular culture over the past fifty years. These decades have assaulted the very concept of truth itself, particularly the idea of universal truth.

It has been replaced with a definition of truth which is totally subjective in nature. By this new standard of truth "what is true for you is not necessarily true for me."

In the 1970s I heard Francis Schaeffer, the noted philosopher and theologian, use the term "true truth." When asked about this awkward phrase, he said that lectures to university students had reduced him to speaking in this manner.

Many students, he explained, treated all truth as subjective. Consequently, he had resorted to "true truth" as a way of describing truth which is something more than mere personal perspective.

In the years since his comment, the meaning of truth has continued to erode. Along with it, moral and ethical codes have become increasingly relativistic. After all, if there is no genuine truth, neither is there anything which is truly right or wrong.

Interestingly, however, even among the most relativistic thinkers, only a pure Machiavellian defends hypocrisy. Today few indictments are more stinging than to be called "a hypocrite."

This attests to the fact that, despite all the word games with "truth," we have a universal consensus that statements should align closely with reality. This is also why leaders who shave the truth lose respect and trust, even in an age of relativistic morality,

A solid reputation for truth-telling serves us especially well in those moments which all leaders face when we must purposefully withhold information from our people. Or when we must defend unpopular decisions by saying, "I'm not free to go into the details."

When someone is particularly distraught with a decision which we've made, they may interpret "I'm not free to go into the details" as stone-walling, ducking the truth, or a cover-up. And as leaders we have little power to disarm this conviction once it takes shape in the minds of observers. But if leaders have established a stalwart record for telling the truth, people are more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt when details must be closely held.

We have all heard leaders say, “Trust me on this.” And we have probably uttered the words ourselves. Yet, no matter how respectfully we make the request, people may refuse to comply.

Moreover, when they do in fact choose to trust us and give us the benefit of the doubt, their choice has little to do with our request. Instead, they grant us the benefit of the doubt because they have watched us in action and know that we have an absolutely consistent record for integrity and truth-telling.

Truthful, straightforward communication is essential if an organization is to stay grounded in reality. Without straightforward communication, trust in leadership will remain limited. People don’t trust fully when they suspect that they are being doled out a dish of selective truth.

Newly elected politicians in both major parties usually attend a “charm school” that teaches them, among other things, how to bob and weave artfully when answering a question. In confidential, “off-the-record” conversations I’ve even had national political figures spell out their specific techniques for seeming to answer a question without really answering it. Then they wonder why public trust in politicians is so low!!

It’s no accident that the word “spin” first became popularly associated with political speech. Political figures are so frequently blatant in their use of spin that ordinary citizens are becoming astute at recognizing it when it happens. And people are now just as quick to suspect spin in corporate life as they are in political life.

Few things are more disarming, therefore, or a greater contributor to trust, than a leader who speaks straightforwardly. A leader who is upfront with people. Who avoids spin and slanted reporting. Who never sugar-coats things to make himself or herself look good. Who lays things out as they really are and deals with them realistically.

Straightforward communication must also extend to accountability and evaluations of performance. The board of a non-profit organization once asked me to meet with them to discuss a key player in their organization whose performance was substandard. Some on the board had already made up their minds to dismiss him. Others felt that with coaching he could be rescued. They wanted to know my opinion.

“How long have you had misgivings about his performance?”

I opened.

“Well, we actually had a vote of no-confidence in him three years ago,” came the reply. (Unfortunately, the non-profit world is notorious for leaving underperformers in place long after the for-profit world would have let them go.)

I then asked, “How many job reviews has he had since then?” “We’ve reviewed him every year.”

“And does he know about the vote of no-confidence?” I continued.

They acknowledged that he did not.

“Even though you never told him about the no-confidence vote, did you address with him candidly the factors that led to your vote?” This time the answer was a “yes,” followed immediately by a long, reflective pause. Finally, one board member looked around the room and

said, “Let’s be honest. We didn’t really level with him. We sugar-coated the message so much that I’m not sure he ever heard it.”

Now, three years later, they were dealing with considerable discontent within their staff and among themselves, primarily because they had chosen to be less than forthright in reviewing his performance. Failure to maintain straightforward communication almost always comes back to haunt us.

Lest I seem to be picking on non-profits, let me hasten to add that I’ve seen this same type of failure in business. I think of two partners who started a business in a garage along with a woman who kept their records and handled administrative matters.

Five years later, the company had grown to 200 employees with a heavy manufacturing schedule. The woman was also still with them, still serving as their executive assistant. But her attitude and communication style were running off workers right and left. Turnover was driving recruiting and training costs through the roof.

The partners would not be straightforward with her about her conduct, however, for fear that she would walk out the door. Having been with the company from the beginning, she was the sole repository for critical corporate knowledge.

The partners were afraid that they could not get by without her expertise. The price which they were paying, however, was a climate of distrust that was probably impacting their bottom line far more adversely than the cost of training someone to fill her role.

I consulted with another company that expended constant organizational energy “wiring around” a top-level manager whose people skills left much to be desired. Yet no one had ever leveled with him about his poor people skills. He had received fairly stellar performance reviews for years.

When I asked why, I was told that he was by far the company’s most ingenious thinker in terms of new products. No one wanted to risk losing him to a competitor by openly addressing his deficiencies in direct conversation with him.

When these kinds of situations go unchecked through repeated review cycles, they become especially difficult to deal with later. In each of the cases cited above, so much dissension had arisen around the problem employee that corrective action was no longer an option. Something had to be done, and soon.

But management found itself in a bind, for to tell the employee that past performance reviews had been less than straightforward was to acknowledge that management had also been less than truthful. And that’s a difficult admission to make.

Moreover, even when management musters the courage to make this admission, there’s no assurance that the employee will receive it well. Instead, the employee may shout from the rooftops about management “hypocrisy” in failing to be forthright for months or even years.

Other workers, who hear the disgruntled employee’s tale, then start to wonder, “What about me? Are they doing the same thing to me? Are they giving me an honest appraisal of my performance?” These questions, in turn, undercut trust in the organization’s basic integrity.

In the long-run we do more damage to trust by postponing the moment of truth than by putting truth squarely on the table in a non-accusatory tone. Most people respect straightforwardness. No one respects what they view as deception or hypocrisy. For this reason, Juanell Teague's adage serves us well. Tell the truth quicker, faster.

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