

Speaking Authentically

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When was the last time you told the truth? When was the last time you really spoke authentically about what you needed and wanted? Can you remember? For many of us, the last time we spoke authentically was when we were about 4 years old. By the time we were about 5 years old we had ‘learned’ to be ‘nice and polite.’

Of course there are benefits of being nice and polite. People tend to like us, they like to be around us, and we make it comfortable for them. People have often gotten hired or promoted because of their “niceness” and ability to “get along.” I call it the “boom” theory. Some new person comes to work in an organization and starts hanging around the boss’ office shooting the breeze and then soon they are playing golf together. Then “boom” this new employee is getting promoted over more seasoned professionals. These kinds of hiring decisions are often not based on the facts or telling the truth and usually have negative results

I am not degrading our desires to build partnerships or strong relationships. Those are certainly valuable and important skills. I’m referring to those people who only “go along to get along”.

Now, let’s look at some of the costs to this approach. If we stopped telling the truth when we were about 5 years old, how do people know what we value and what we don’t value? Even if we have developed a strong social or business network because we have been so nice, this network is built on a pretty weak foundation. If we have been accepted because we don’t tell the truth and speak out about what works for us and what doesn’t work for us, we don’t really have the freedom to move out of that role. This costs us in the quality of those relationships, our own personal freedom, our energy and enthusiasm for life and for work. This approach also costs us and our organizations in many highly significant ways. Even if someone is promoted because they get along with the boss, their career may be fairly short-lived in that organization. You see, if people are making hiring decisions based on with whom they are comfortable, what they get is an organization of people who look just like them and who will make decisions just like their own. Without differences of opinions or new perspectives, the organization is eventually severely limited in what it can accomplish. I have seen that happen any number of times in large and small organizations.

Other costs to the organization include loss of productivity. When people have not bought into a concept or project but do not feel comfortable telling the truth about it, they might drag their feet on their portion of the project or they might spend a lot of time

generating negative water cooler conversations about the project, thereby affecting others' productivity and commitment to the project.

Another example of the high cost of not telling the truth is feeling disempowered by your boss. Perhaps you were making a presentation at a meeting with a client and your boss spoke over you or interrupted you. Perhaps the boss simply thought he was adding value or thinking out loud. If you felt disempowered in any way and did not tell the boss, either in the moment or later, your entire relationship with the boss will be negatively affected.

In future meetings you won't be able to focus on the discussion item at hand. You will be thinking, "Does he/she think I don't know enough to present this correctly and completely?" or "Does she think that I just don't add value to this organization?" Whatever the thoughts are, they will limit your ability to be a highly productive leader within your organization. The costs related to not telling the truth are great and have a huge impact on the organization and on your degree of personal satisfaction and fulfillment

What does it mean to tell the truth and how can we do that? Especially now that many of us have years of being conditioned to be 'polite'? We must first remember that every encounter provides an opportunity to either build trust and respect or diminish your organization's culture by not building trust and demonstrating respect.

Of course, there are those people who are blunt and outspoken but you don't want to be like them. They show up in every organization but you would not want to model your own career after theirs. They offend people. They stop the flow of creativity. They certainly don't make the work environment feel safe. We do have to throw people the ball in a way that makes it easy for them to catch that ball.

So how can we make this work? How can we tell the truth, be authentic, not step over 'jokes', inappropriate humor, snide remarks, and yet, do it in a way that is not offensive or disruptive?

I propose there are five steps to doing this. This will take practice and, most importantly, experimentation. Treat these five steps as if you are a scientist conducting an important experiment. Each time you experiment, even if the experiment blows up, you will learn. Then you can run the experiment again with the new information and continue to learn until you develop the skill and ability to tell the truth easily and effortlessly.

1. Prepare
2. Gather context prior to delivering the message
3. Create a safe space
4. Deliver the message
5. Review the process

The first step is to prepare. You will need to prepare the words you want to say, and, more importantly, you will need to prepare yourself. If the message that you want to deliver is one that is critical or causes you to feel emotional or charged in some way, it will be important for you to prepare in a way that calms those emotions. Writing every word down, over and over, until you have just the right words and feel very calm is one very useful way to prepare.

I have worked with executives who are extremely effective in leading organizations with hundreds of people. They are well respected, have loyalty from their people, have achieved tremendous results and would not be considered to be emotional or ineffective communicators. And yet, because they have so many commitments, they often have not practiced this step. When they start to put this practice into place and calendar a reserve of time prior to each commitment to really prepare and collect their thoughts and to visualize the results that they want to create, they become much more effective leaders. There are fewer and fewer ‘miss-fires’ in communication. Their people ‘hear’ them and their message in a new way. They are even more articulate in sharing their vision. Their people, by seeing the vision more clearly, are able to buy-in more readily and produce even more extraordinary results.

The second step is to gather enough context prior to delivering the message. Context is the bowl that you will deliver the message in. For example, if you want to tell your boss, that he has said something that disturbed you in a meeting with a client, you might want to give him some context. For example, “You know, as I understood it, the purpose of the meeting we had with our client yesterday was for me to start to build a stronger relationship with them. I believe if I can work more closely with them, they won’t need to rely on you so much. This will free you up to work with other clients.” You don’t want to give your boss a sad story about the client, yourself or the meeting, but you want to remind him of the agreements that you had made prior to the meeting. Or, if you had not made those agreements, the context you could give could be what your intention had been, even if you had not said it out loud.

The purpose of the context is to create a space for the other person to really hear where you are coming from. I have a client who has been very successful in leading her team. She uses straight-talk and gets results. However sometimes she did not have buy-in and she did not know it. Sometimes her team members felt invalidated or even abused in some way. The team’s results were always on target but the members felt dissatisfied because there was no affinity with this boss. When this leader was able to see that the only thing missing in her communication was giving enough context, she started practicing that rigorously. She experimented until she felt comfortable. She took time to prepare, not just her messages, but also the context she wanted to deliver. She took time to respond to her team instead of just reacting in the moment so that she could be better prepared with her response. All of this additional preparation and context giving made a tremendous difference to her people. They felt safer, more comfortable. They felt empowered and, most importantly, they felt included instead of just being told the bottom line answer.

The third step is to create a safe space. Robert Hargrove, in his book *Mastering the Art of Creative Collaboration*, says that there is intellectual safe space and logistical safe space. He suggests that organizations create a logistical safe space by designating a room called the “Dialogue Lab” that facilitates people having high quality dialogue. The room could include white boards and flip charts, and guidelines for speaking authentically. Intellectual safe space means facilitating the dialogue itself in a way that encourages people with diverse ideas and perspectives to open up and talk about things that matter to them. You will need to find a location, behind closed doors, that will allow for some open, authentic conversation. You will also want to create an environment that makes the other people feel safe, feel like they are not going to be attacked for their prior actions or comments. Speaking authentically also carries a significant benefit to the entire organization. If anyone feels attacked, ridiculed, or feels that they have done something wrong, they will immediately withdraw or go into a mode of defending themselves and their actions and the conversation will get halted. This step, creating a safe space, may initially require outside assistance by a facilitator or coach who is skilled in creating these safe spaces.

The fourth step is to simply deliver the message. After you have created the safe space logistically, you feel well prepared, not just to say the right words but also to actually be a person who is calm, centered, and focused. You will have given the other party enough context so they know what your perspective is, so now you simply tell the truth.

Let’s go back to the example above where your boss talked over you in an important presentation you were making to a client. Simply tell your boss how what he did made you feel in that moment. Tell him how you felt, inadequate or inexperienced, etc. How it affected your whole presentation because your mind was no longer clear. That while you were trying to present to the client you were having concerns about what your boss thought about you. Explain how you didn’t feel that the relationship with the client was strengthened and how it has affected your interaction with them since the meeting. Help your boss understand how his actions and words, which may not have meant anything to him at the time, have severely affected your effectiveness with the client. Focus on making it safe for the boss to both ‘hear’ what you are saying and respond appropriately. It won’t help your situation if the boss feels the need to defend himself.

The fifth and most important step is to review the process. It is important for all parties to evaluate how effective the communication was. For example, after you have delivered the message to your boss, look to see what was missing when the two of you were preparing for the client meeting. Were you both in alignment about the objective of the meeting? Were you both in alignment about the desired outcomes from the meeting? Were you clear about which role each of you would play during the meeting? Was the agenda clear and specific? Did you agree not to speak over each other?

Then look to see what was missing during the meeting. What could you have done to raise the comfort level of your boss so he would feel that you could cover all the important topics? What other structures would have been useful so that both you and your boss knew that all of the important information would be reviewed in a complete

and accurate manner without any interruptions or talking over each other?

Finally, ask your boss what worked and what did not work about your speaking authentically, after the fact. Let him say everything he needs to say or wants to say. The purpose of doing this review is to turn the entire experience into a series of learning experiences. How can you and your boss communicate more effectively on a daily basis? How can you establish a system for preparing for client presentations that ensures that all presentations are complete, accurate and flawless?

Once you understand the cost to you and to your organization of not speaking authentically and then do a cost/benefit analysis to see the extraordinary benefits that result for the entire organization when you do speak authentically; and then experiment until speaking authentically comes naturally and with ease, you will be unstoppable and you will be promoted and recognized for the right reasons--not because you are "nice" but because you are a key contributor to your organization.