

Listening Coaching for Leaders, Published in InComms eNewsletter Jan 2006

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InComms Bulletin January/February 2006

Hard Acts

Are you being shielded from the truth?

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When you need to make important business decisions, you depend on the quality of the information you are given. Are other people managing your expectations, telling you what they think you want to hear? How do you ensure that you get an accurate view of the situation? Organisational communications advisor Lindsay Bogaard looks at how you can break down the barriers.

Your brain uses life experiences and commercial savvy to process information. It draws on your personal attributes and characteristics. It is fuelled by your motives and your aspirations. It makes thousands of micro decisions and some very significant decisions every day. Your skill is making the best possible decisions and bringing those decisions to life. But unless you do all your research work yourself, you are completely dependent on those around you to get the information you need. Facts, conclusions, interpretations: the 'softer' those pieces of data, the more subjective they are.

Why people manipulate data

There are four reasons why people around you manipulate data they give you, the first three are often well-intended:

1. They are protective of you

People are sympathetic creatures and if someone who knows you well sees you're under pressure, they'll try to make things better. They may not be able to find the right time to give you difficult news. For example, there may be decreasing popularity for a new project. If they are protecting you, they are much more likely to say that the "project is still catching on", to soften the message.

What to do: When you hear subjective statements that may have been 'spun', probe for deeper information. Ask in a calm and open way to show that you welcome a more realistic appraisal. You could also ask for hard data: "How many people have signed up compared to our estimates?"

COMMUNICATION WISDOM

"Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds." - Albert Einstein

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- Internal Communications Manager

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2. They find it difficult to approach you

If you are an expressive person who openly vents negative energy, you might not be aware that you are intimidating to others. If people regularly experience emotional reactions when they provide you with input, they will avoid giving you bad news.

What to do: You need to find a way of expressing yourself without using others to soak up your feelings. Sport, art, music and amateur dramatics are notoriously good for this. If you get some news that provokes a negative reaction then thank the

messenger and acknowledge how you feel. Vent those feelings later, in a suitable way and at a suitable time.

3. They are timid

This is really their issue – they may have been poorly managed in the past, creating a fear of authority. There could be a whole number of issues preventing them from pushing bad news upwards, or it could just be their personality.

What to do: You can either try to coach them out of it or get someone else who is courageous enough to tell you the truth. If you choose to coach them, tell them explicitly what you expect and why. Assure them by reacting to information from them positively and show consistency in this behaviour over a period of several weeks before you re-evaluate their reliability.

4. They are manoeuvring themselves politically

People who put themselves and their careers above the goals of their company are advantage seekers. In some circles, where the culture has enabled people like this to thrive, this kind of behaviour is accepted as normal business practice. Often, people don't even realise they are doing it but the net effect is simply the creation of misleading spin. "The project I'm leading has won some great publicity"; "Our guys have been working so hard – we're really breaking the back of this thing together". They are keenly ambitious, bold and unscrupulous. They want to associate themselves with success to give the impression that they deserve to be given success themselves.

What to do: Use the cornerstones of quality management to hunt down what's really going on. Ensure projects have success factors identified and measure progress against those with key performance indicators. Focus on the data. Ask for factual updates and transparent reporting information.

As a leader, you can trust and verify. If you give people the freedom and space they need to pursue business objectives, you can check on them too. Your trust won't be broken if you show that you're prepared to take responsibility for ensuring that your perception matches reality.

The more you encourage straightforward honesty, the more you'll mould your team or organisation into having a truthful reporting culture.