



Helping Employees Speak Up

By Larry Johnson

The question for all managers is how to make sure their employees aren't afraid to tell them what they need to know.

In November 2013, a gunman took shots at the White House from outside the grounds, successfully hitting the building. A Secret Service officer standing on the Truman Balcony became aware of the attack when she heard shots and felt marble and glass cascading down on her from bullet strikes on the walls and windows. She told several senior officers that she thought the house had been hit. At a briefing the next day, supervisors explained that the gunshots were from people in two cars shooting at each other and that the incident did not involve the White House. The agent did not challenge her superiors “for fear of being criticized.”¹ Later that day, the FBI searched the area around the Truman Balcony and found damage to the building from the bullet strikes.

In this case, the damage caused by a subordinate's fear of disagreeing with her superiors was minimal — just some embarrassment for the Secret Service. Being afraid to give managers timely and necessary feedback can have much more devastating results. For example, in 2001, the nuclear submarine U.S.S. Greenville was conducting a special tour for a group of civilians off the coast of Hawaii and decided to show off by demonstrating an “emergency blow,” rapidly rising from the ocean depths and breaking through the surface like a whale playing in the waves. Unfortunately, the rapidly emerging submarine collided with the

Ehime Maru, a Japanese fishing vessel, sinking the small boat and killing nine of the 35 people onboard.

A subsequent U.S. naval inquiry uncovered many mistakes made by the Greenville's captain and crew that day, chief among them the failure of the fire control technician to warn the commander that the sonar display had identified a ship in the area. In a subsequent interview, a Navy captain with extensive command experience of nuclear submarines, said: “On this particular ship, and on a lot of ships in the Navy, the crew has so much trust in the skipper's abilities that they don't question him when they should. The FCT had a ship on the display but he saw the captain looking through the periscope. He probably assumed that if the skipper didn't see it...it wasn't there.”²

These two incidents look a lot like cases of “The Emperor's New Clothes,” a short story written by Hans Christian Andersen about two weavers who promise an emperor a new suit that is invisible to anyone who is stupid or incompetent. In reality, they make no clothes at all, making everyone believe the suit is only invisible to them. When the emperor parades naked before his subjects, no one dares to say they don't see any clothes for fear of being judged harshly.

How often does it happen that, for one reason or another, no one tells managers what they need to know,

and as a result, the manager or the organization blunders into a disaster? Perhaps a new account manager spots a serious, unaddressed risk, but feels timid about speaking up. Maybe someone from the management team has a bad feeling about entering into a risky development deal, but says nothing because everyone else is so gung-ho about it. Or perhaps nobody voices any complaints about an unqualified, non-performing employee in a key position because they are reluctant to question their manager's hiring choice. "She's the boss," they reason; "she must know what she's doing." Even worse, they keep silent because they are afraid of retribution for appearing disloyal — and perhaps with good reason. If the manager has punished other bearers of bad news, why would anyone volunteer to be the next victim?

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Managers don't need to be as vain and stupid as the naked emperor to make bad decisions. Most people's perspectives are limited in some way. A number of people told Alexander Graham Bell that nobody would ever want to use the telephone. Thomas Watson, the man who led IBM from the age of typewriters to the beginning of the computer era, said in 1943 that "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers. And television was orig-

inally written off as a passing phase. Whether they're out of touch with current trends, sensitive about not having all the answers, or simply misinformed, all managers rely on honest feedback from their employees. Otherwise, they, like the naked emperor, are destined to make and support poor decisions.³

ENCOURAGE HONEST FEEDBACK

The question for all managers is how to make sure their employees aren't afraid to tell them what they need to know. There are three critical things a manager can do to encourage honest feedback from subordinates:

1. Make It Clear that You Want the Feedback. Let people know — repeatedly — that you are not perfect and you expect them to help you make the best decisions possible, so any help they can offer will be appreciated, especially if they see you about to do something stupid.

2. Don't Be Defensive. When someone gives you this kind of feedback, control your defensiveness. None of us like to be criticized, and it's easy to argue and even respond with hostility when a subordinate suggests there might be another, better, approach. You aren't going to agree to something you know to be wrong — you just need to listen openly to the incoming information.

3. Thank the Employee — and Mean It. Whether or not you take the advice the subordinate offers, be sure to thank her and express your appreciation for bringing the matter to your attention. Reinforced behavior tends to get repeated, so if you want people to give you more feedback, reward them for doing so.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

A woman who works in a government organization told me she didn't like or trust the director. When asked why, she said the director didn't like her. Since she worked several levels below the director, I asked how she knew he didn't like her. "I see him in the hall every day. He has yet to say 'good morning' to me or acknowledge that I exist," she replied. When asked if she had ever said 'good morning' to him, she said, "Of course not — he's the director. You just can't go up and introduce yourself."

This story may seem strange if you are the kind of person who feels comfortable in the presence of those with more power than you, but for many people, being in the presence of the "big boss" can be a very intimidating experience. If you are that "big boss," expecting people to always tell you the truth, especially if the truth is not what you want to hear, means expecting them to act well beyond their comfort zones.

You can reduce that tension by taking the time to build rapport with employees. Recognizing them through common courtesies, small talk, and genuine inquiry about their jobs, families, and opinions will go a long way toward helping them relax, open up, and feel comfortable enough to be honest and open with you. Only genuine interest, however, will elicit genuine responses.

Another government executive, who was the director of the city of Phoenix's sanitation department, arrived at a different service center early every morning so he could have coffee with the drivers before they started their routes.

There were ten centers, so every sanitation employee had a chance to chat informally with the “big boss” every ten working days.

Consequently, when something was wrong, the director often heard about it first. He knew the condition of the trucks as well as the drivers did, got wind of citizen complaints that were never officially filed, and was familiar with inefficiencies in route scheduling. He felt that his morning coffee routine was one of the main reasons that the division of solid waste collection was nationally recognized.⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Encouraging honest feedback from subordinates on a regular basis won’t

guarantee you’ll never be embarrassed like the Secret Service folks have been, but it will raise the odds you’ll be a well-dressed emperor. ■

Whether or not you take the advice a subordinate offers, be sure to thank her and express your appreciation for bringing the matter to your attention.

Notes

1. Elliott C. McLaughlin, Jason Hanna, and Deirdre Walsh, “Secret Service director calls White House intrusion ‘unacceptable,’” CNN Politics, September 30, 2014.

2. “Naval officers insist latest incident won’t change the military procedures,” the Daily Free Press, April 9, 2001.

3. Adapted from Larry Johnson and Bob Phillips, *Absolute Honesty: Building A Corporate Culture That Values Straight Talk And Rewards Integrity*, (2003: AMACOM Books).

4. Ibid.

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