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Truth-Telling in Organizations

My sons brought home a letter from the Executive Principal at their school. It reminded me of the memos I saw from CEOs of the companies I worked for. The letter referred to an “unfortunate off-campus incident involving a student” and emphasized that the school was concerned about the welfare of the student. The memo went on to say that bullying and harassment were not tolerated by the administration and that the school was taking steps to re-evaluate their efforts to educate the students about the consequences of this behavior.

My husband handed me the memo at the dinner table. “Did you read this? It’s about a student who attempted suicide.”

Could have fooled me. “How do you know? There’s nothing in this letter to indicate the student was attempting suicide.” All it showed was a re-evaluation of policy and procedure and a concern for a student involved in an “unfortunate incident.” My husband responded, “Oh, I know because Andy told me. And Andy found out from his teacher.” My son, Andy, is in the fourth grade. The Executive Principal didn’t feel that he could tell parents--adults, tax-paying citizens--the specifics of the “unfortunate incident” but one wise teacher realized that his fourth graders could hear the truth.

I was upset. This scenario was all too familiar. I was recalling words that I had written about leadership within organizations. “Trust people to be able to hear the truth. Whatever it is that you are afraid to say is what needs to be said.”

A week later, there was an article on the front page of the local paper. The “unfortunate incident” was clearly described as a student attempting to slash her wrists.

The irony of holding back the truth in organizations is that the truth eventually comes out. It comes out in the whispers in the hallway, in the emails sent from cubicle to cubicle, or in this case, in the morning paper, with no means for making meaning out of it other than gossipy tongues. There, the truth lingers, like a bad perfume. And there, it dies, unwoven into a richer fabric that is waiting to emerge from the community.

There are other costs. We lose the ability to engage the members of the organization in the solution. When only “the top” is privy to the truth--about the financial condition of the company, about a breach of ethics, about a product recall, about the breakdown of a critical business process--only “the top” can be involved in the solution. No amount of education on the dangers of bullying and harassment will motivate a student to think differently if they don’t see the real-life story behind the extra effort. The school administrator’s memo was reduced to a verbose, stale explanation of policy and procedure, to be tossed in the trash of irrelevance. What would have been the impact if this administrator had been able to tell the entire truth—that a student had attempted to slash her wrists and that bullying and/or harassment was thought to be part of the trigger? What kind of conversations would be at the dinner table that night? Who would have decided to become part of the solution instead of part of the problem?

What does it take to be a truth-teller in organizations? I once read that courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is acting in the face of fear. In order to gain the higher good that comes with truth, we must be willing to disturb others, as well as ourselves.

A friend of mine was hired out of graduate school to design and implement employee communications programs. It was her dream job, having studied about communication design and organizational development. When the company decided they needed to lay off employees as part of a larger restructuring, the senior management called her in to figure out how to communicate about the layoffs. My friend argued for an approach that would embrace the simple truth of what was happening—people were being laid off—and recognize the human impact to everyone. The senior management thought otherwise. They instructed her to say very little about the why of the layoff or the human element and focus on the loose ends of 401K plans and stock options. When she talks about her acquiescing to tow the party line, I can see that this event has been placed in her archive of lessons learned the hard way. One month after she negotiated her spirit away in favor of an uneasy security, she was laid off as well.

Being the truth-teller is about knowing in the moment what the higher good is, and having the willingness to burn at the stake so that the higher good can stand intact and unscathed. If we only worry about the flames licking at our feet, we will forget that it is the heat that melds the pure metals into a stronger alloy.

We serve no one by holding back the truth, other than our own egos. These are the same egos that think that power lies in the hands of formal authority. The real power lies in the hearts of the collective. That is what determines the fate of the organization.

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