

The Bare Truth
by Larry Johnson and Bob Phillips

While conducting a special tour for a group of civilians off the coast of Hawaii on February 9, 2001, the nuclear submarine USS Greenville launched an “emergency blow.” This is a procedure in which the submarine rises rapidly from the depths of the ocean and breaks free from the surface of the water like a whale erupting from the deep. The purpose of the procedure that day was to show the civilians aboard what the ship could do, and according to subsequent testimony, “To give them a bit of a thrill.” Unfortunately, the Japanese fishing boat Ehime Maru was sitting in the path of the rapidly rising submarine. Nine passengers lost their lives as the Ehime Maru sank to the bottom of the Pacific.

A subsequent Naval inquiry uncovered many mistakes made by the Greenville’s Captain, Commander Scott D. Waddle and by his crew, that contributed to the deadly accident. Not the least of those mistakes was the failure of the FCT, (Fire Control Technician), to warn Commander Waddle that there was a ship in the area, even though the FCT had seen the ship on the sonar display prior to the accident.

During the hearing, Navy Capt. Conrad Donahue, (a commander of two submarines during his 27-year Navy career), testified: “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.”

How often does it happen in organizations that for one reason or another, no one tells the manager what the manager needs to know - and as a result, the manager blunders into a disaster? Perhaps it’s a marketing strategy that’s flawed. Maybe it’s a decision to enter into a business deal that’s overly risky. Perhaps it’s keeping an employee in a key position who’s not performing. Everyone knows the employee is wrong for the position, but no one tells the manager because the manager chose the employee in the first place and, “since she’s the manager, she must know what she’s doing.”

Or even worse, no one tells the manager because they’re afraid of retribution for appearing disloyal – and perhaps with good reason. If other bearers of bad news have

been shot, no one wants to be the next victim. So everyone takes a “head in the sand approach” as the manager blindly carries on.

I see such lack of truthfulness as the corporate equivalent of the children’s fable, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. As you probably remember, an unscrupulous tailor with a gift for salesmanship convinces a vain and rather stupid emperor that for a large sum of gold he can sew a suit of clothes for the emperor of such fine thread that only the most intelligent and sophisticated can see it. The guileless emperor buys it and ends up parading around town stark naked. Of course, none of the town’s people want to tell the emperor that he has no clothes on so the emperor carries on as if everything’s normal. It finally takes the innocent bravery of a small child to give the emperor the honest feedback he so desperately needs.

Managers don’t need to be as vain and stupid as the emperor to make bad decisions. Sometimes the brightest and best managers have limited perspective. After all, it was Bill Gates who, in 1981, asked the question, “Why would anyone need more than 640K of disk storage space?” No one is perfect. Managers do need good information, however, if they are going to make good decisions. If they can’t get honest feedback from their employees, they, like the Emperor, are destined to make and support poor decisions.

Andrew S. Grove, Chairman of Intel Corporation, appears to agree. In his book, *Only the Paranoid Survive*, he points out that for a company to stay competitive in today’s fast-changing world, there needs to be a culture of what he calls “*healthy debate*.” Otherwise, says Grove, employees won’t provide managers and executives with the honest information they need to make fast and accurate decisions about the market place, or about anything else that’s important. Intel makes a great effort to nurture such a practice by integrating into each employee’s performance review a set of expectations that the employee express his opinions openly, honestly, and regularly. To support the effort, Intel requires all employees to take training in direct communication skills and in constructive confrontation techniques.

So what can a leader do, besides setting expectations and providing training, to create such a culture? Leading by example is a good start. An experience that my consulting partner, Bob Phillips, and I had a few years ago might illustrate the point:

Gina works for the IT group of one of our clients, a large high-tech manufacturing company. Part of her job is to approve or deny computer system changes that are requested by internal customers. Consequently, she is often seen by those internal customers she denies as the system-cop at best, and at worst, as the “Wicked Witch of the West.”

During a weekly staff meeting, Tom (Gina’s boss), in an attempt to be funny, made the off-handed comment, “If a difficult customer gives us too much trouble, we’ll just sic Gina on him.”

At that point, Gina said in a clear, non-aggressive, but very firm voice, “Wait a minute, Tom. When you refer to me like that, even jokingly here in the group, it really puts me in a difficult position. You and I have talked about customers perceiving me to be a ‘witch’ and comments like that one just make it worse.”

After a few awkward seconds of silence, the group continued with its discussion. Then Tom, (much to his credit) said, “Just a minute. Before we go any further, I’d like to address what Gina just said.” Turning to Gina, he continued, “Gina, we did discuss the issue of your being perceived negatively by customers, and you’re right. My comment was out of line. I apologize.”

Instantly, the group tension that had been created by Gina’s confrontation of Tom disappeared, and the group moved on.

As consultant/observers at this meeting, Bob and I later discussed with the group what had happened. When we asked Gina why she felt comfortable confronting Tom as she had, the rest of the team laughed. They answered our puzzled looks by saying that it is Gina’s style to speak up to anyone, at anytime, about anything - even her boss. (Small wonder that she is cast in the role of being the “cop” who delivers bad news to customers!)

Gina, on the other hand, said that the credit belonged to Tom, who had created an atmosphere among the team where people could speak their minds without fear of retribution. Gina went on to say that she had worked for other managers to whom she

would *never* have spoken up in the same forthright manner about *anything*. Had Tom been that type of manager, she would have kept her mouth shut.

Of course, if that had been the case, Gina's resentment toward Tom for making the comment probably would have festered, appearing elsewhere in the form of indirect complaining to coworkers or in the development of a Dilbertesque attitude of cynicism and mistrust.

We complimented Tom for his willingness to admit he was wrong, and asked if his response to Gina was part of an intentional effort on his part to create the kind of open atmosphere to which Gina had referred. Tom modestly pointed out that he had apologized to Gina only because he *was* wrong, and the apology was appropriate.

Tom went on to say that the response *was* his way of nurturing an atmosphere of open discussion among the team, but that this kind of atmosphere is a two way street. "Had I truly felt I was right, I would have told Gina so with the same forthrightness she had used with me." (The group laughed in wholehearted agreement.) Tom pointed out that if he always apologized, or said he was wrong, even when he believed he was right, then his graciousness would be perceived, accurately, as masking weakness. "The key," he said, "is to simply express your views honestly, and respect everyone else's right to do the same."

Knowingly or not, Tom was creating a culture of what we call a ***Culture of Honesty and Healthy Debate*** – that is, a culture where people at all levels in the organization feel free to candidly express their views, question decisions, and challenge the status quo.

Of course, such a culture does not exist in a vacuum. My research with companies like Intel and IBM, (since CEO Lou Gerstner came aboard) has found that they support their own versions of ***Culture of Honesty and Healthy Debate*** by abiding by what we call the Seven Rules of Cultural Honesty. They are:

Rule #1 — Always tell the truth

Our mothers told us that the worst truth is always better than the best lie — and they were right. Congressman Gary Condit learned this when he claimed

that his relationship with missing intern Chandra Levy relationship was strictly platonic; his dishonesty generated such a sense of mistrust that, even though he was not considered a suspect, everything he said came under close scrutiny. He subsequently lost his bid for reelection - despite the fact that prior to Levy's disappearance, he was favored to win by a landslide.

Whether you are a congressman or a manager, your ability to lead others depends on their trust in you. By consistently telling the truth, you not only earn that trust, but also create a psychological obligation in others that demands they do the same for you. The downside, of course, is that telling the truth can be inconvenient, embarrassing, and painful. As we explore this fundamental rule, we'll show you how to avoid the pitfalls and difficulties of building a corporate culture where telling the truth is sacrosanct.

Rule #2 — Never seek retribution for honesty

Nothing will kill the spirit of open communication and honest debate in an organization faster than retribution. Remember, it was fear of retribution that kept the townspeople from telling the Emperor he was naked as he paraded through the town. If managers punish people for expressing their opinions, those opinions will simply go underground, reappearing as cynical e-mail jokes and hushed conversations in the lunchroom. For this reason, managers must guard against this practice with great vigilance. Complicating their task, however, is the fact that even when actual retribution is not present, the perception that it exists can produce the same effect. Incorporating this rule in your company, then, means identifying and eliminating not only practices of retribution, but also any false perceptions that it exists.

Rule #3 — Practice constructive confrontation

Learning to confront tough issues in a healthy and straightforward manner can enable people to quickly resolve differences of opinion while maintaining the dignity and the mutual respect of the individuals involved. Constructive confrontation emphasizes solving problems and making decisions by

focusing on the best possible outcome for the organization while avoiding damage to the relationships of those involved.

Rule #4 — Agree to both disagree and commit

We've all been to meetings where everyone appeared to agree to a decision, but then, once the meeting was over, immediately started criticizing the decision, lobbying for their own positions, or worst of all, sabotaging the meeting's action plan. The corporate practice of disagreeing and committing requires everyone in the organization to express their opinions openly - even if those opinions go against the grain of the group; however, once everyone has reached consensus on a particular decision or course of action, all are expected to support the decision wholeheartedly.

Rule #5 - Keep disagreement professional, not personal

Responding to criticism defensively, and attacking when we feel attacked are such instinctive behaviors, they're daunting to overcome. After all, our ancestors learned to survive by reacting to perceived danger with a fight or flight response. Those who froze in the presence of saber-toothed tigers became tiger lunch and those who fled from the danger, or stabbed it with a spear lived to pass their genes along to us. In the corporate world, of course, when someone challenges or criticizes you, you can't stick him with a spear'— and running away, or passive non-reaction, won't get you very far either. A culture of honesty depends on everyone in that culture being able to criticize and be criticized in an open, healthy and nondestructive way. By drawing on specific tools and techniques, people can learn how to avoid reacting defensively and lashing out when criticized, as well as how to offer criticism using a respectful and useful approach.

Rule #6 — Focus on solutions for the greater good

Traditional conflict management emphasizes the search for a win/win solution to problem-solving—one where all parties “feel” like they got something from the transaction. That way, everyone is more likely to support

the outcome. While this sounds great on paper, not only do many problems have no win/win solution, a win/win is not always the best solution. Sometimes, someone has to lose so the best decision can prevail. When the differing parties can set aside their egos and focus on what's best for the company, winning and losing become irrelevant. Building this concept into your company's culture means creating a non-hostile environment where people feel safe enough to put aside their defensiveness and need to win so they focus their energy on creating the best solution for the company.

Rule #7 — Don't abuse the practice of honesty

Once you've integrated the practice of absolute honesty into your organization's culture, beware of aggressive types who might use it as an excuse for rudeness or antisocial behavior. They'll tell you they're simply practicing the honesty doctrine that management is preaching, but in truth, they're committing what we call "honesty abuse." A culture of honesty supports an infrastructure that nurtures an atmosphere of open communication where everyone strives to reach the best decisions for the company, regardless of politics or personalities involved. This means that everyone understands and practices the rules of engagement, which lend structure and support to a culture of honesty so that people don't have to fear being blindsided with unexpected or unfair attacks that cannot be debated.

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