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*Helping you align your people with your vision*



## What if it's you? Tips for the Courageous Leader

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

**One particular conundrum consultants like me face is the value of candor and honesty weighed against the desire to make my clients happy—to give them the good news and hopeful outlook for their organizations and teams and to offer both encouragement and solid advice on how to make it happen for themselves. Therein lies the rub—sometimes, the very thing I need to communicate to an organization and its leadership is the very thing that may cause them to be resistant to the message.**

However, my reticence to speak the truth won't do anyone any favors, even if the risk is high. In other words, sometimes, I have to choose to tell the truth, even though I risk not only making someone uncomfortable or unhappy, but also they might decide to terminate our professional relationship.

On many occasions, when I work with leaders who see the value in bringing an outsider in to help them either move to the next level of success, change the direction of their organizations, transform the culture, or repair a broken team, I might use different assessment tools to learn about the organization and its people and processes. This is not extraordinary—I might interview, conduct surveys or focus groups, visit customers or clients or boards. After gathering data specific to our project, I generally need to make a report to debrief the leader—I actually am excited about this part of the process because no matter what, we have information, and if there are innovative ideas or items to be fixed,

we can devise a strategy to do it. I admit, though, that sometimes, my night before is a bit restless—I am considering my message, my findings, and want to stay true to my own commitment to behave with absolute integrity, which means I must tell the truth as I see it.

One of my favorite pre-client encounters occurred a few years ago with a CEO who was talking with me about whether or not I could help him with the goals for his executive team. He asked a good question: "Why should I hire you? Why you and not someone else?" Let's face it, there are other consultants who do the kinds of things I do with organizations, and I like to partner with my clients, so I replied, "Because I will be absolutely honest with you." This might not seem like such a big deal—who would purport to lie to people they are presumably trying to help? But it is a big deal, and frankly, I think he knew it because he leaned in toward me and said, "Will you tell me if it's me?"

What if it's you? What if your team or organization can be better, faster, more efficient, more profitable, or happier, and you, as the leader, are an obstacle to that movement? What if, even with your best intentions, you cannot seem to make things go in the direction you want, you keep running across resistors and saboteurs? So many times, we think it is them, those others who are supposed to be enthusiastically following along behind us, and well, they're not. And if it is you, and you don't know it and no one will tell you, how can you respond, address it, fix it or dismiss it? You cannot.

Is there anything you can do? Of course! Consider these ideas for encouraging truthfulness in your organization:

**1. Find Your Blind Spot.** Often, we have no idea that something we're doing or saying is having a negative effect on others or on our organization or team. We don't have a clue, even though everyone thinks we are indeed aware of it. This happens a lot more than you might imagine! One way to deal with this is to ask someone you trust—a colleague, employee or partner whom you know will be willing to give you straight, honest feedback. You can say something like this: "You know, I've been thinking about how I can continue to improve as a leader, and I know there are areas where I can develop and grow. What blind spots do you think I have to leadership? What sorts of behaviors or thinking do you see that might be interfering with our goals?" Then, of course, you have to listen, and if you'd like this person to be willing to be honest with you again, you need to be able to maintain perspective, refrain from defensiveness, and thank them for their willingness to tell you. With the feedback you get, you'll have information you might not have had, or affirmation of something you suspected, and now you can begin to respond or make changes if you need to.

**2. Create Honesty Opportunities.** If you want people in your organization to be honest and truthful—and you need them to be! Likely, they are the ones the closest to the work, the customer or service, and they have a perspective for improvement that you simply cannot have at your level—you need to create opportunities for them to be honest. If it's been a long time, or never, sometimes leaders fear this will just turn into a whiney, complaining session. It doesn't have to be, and there are a variety of ways that you can foster this kind of candor. An Open-Door Policy is not enough! (Read that again!) You need to ask direct, specific questions in a variety of manners to get the kind of honesty you need. Employee surveys are good, but not enough! Regular, consistent ways to encourage honesty, along with a culture that supports open discussion and debate, creates the kind of atmosphere where people buy-in, commit and contribute to the creativity and innovation that many organizations crave.

**3. Remember that *How Matters*.** Language matters. How you ask for something matters. How you praise or offer critical feedback matters and will impact, for better or worse, the results you get from your staff and employees. If this isn't your strength, or you've struggled with it in the past—if people are afraid of you or only do things because you tell them to and not because they want to, or it's the right thing to do, consider how you've been interacting. Improve your skills by practicing or taking classes, like *Influencing Skills*, to help you become more effective at creating trust and commitment. *How matters.*

Recently, I had the opportunity to go on a trail ride in the hills above the Columbia River with some good friends. I like horses. From afar, they are one of the most beautiful creatures alive. Close-up, they are enormous and powerful and a bit scary if you're not used to them. Plus, their eyes are on the sides of their heads and you can't really tell where they are looking or whether they're thinking they might like to kick you—and they *know* things. I stuffed my jeans' pockets with carrots. I thought this might be a good incentive and we might be friends. My horse, Jet, knew that I was a novice rider. He knew because soon after we ascended the Ingersol trail up to the top of Colockum Pass, he made it a point to veer toward the low-hanging branches. Mildly funny at first, not so much with continuing consistency. Before I figured out what I was supposed to do, I was hung up in Ponderosa Pines and performing creative gymnastic backbends from the saddle to avoid having my eyes poked out. I still have a bruise on my arm where my ducking was unsuccessful. Apparently, I had forgotten that I was supposed to be leading, offering direction, using my reins appropriately to move him in the direction we needed to go—away from the diabolical branches threatening my vista and my eyeballs. Frankly, I was a bit scared. I was thinking it would've been safer just to ask for a ride around the corral in a circle, and here I was in rocky, rough terrain and I was not in charge, I was not courageous.

Being a courageous leader means that you are not only honest with yourself, but also you allow others to be honest with you. You know how to balance the toughening-up and the asking-for-help when you need it. As the leader, you are responsible for how things are going, whether it's productivity, trust, profits or customer service. You are the model and the visionary—you are the one who has to be willing both to lead from the front and roll up your sleeves if necessary. If things are not going the way you want, and you're convinced it's the horse—it's probably not. It's probably you. ❖

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