When silence isn't golden

How encouraging employee input can boost your bottom line.

BY TOM GREEN

Are your employees consistently telling you everything you need to hear? Or are they instead telling you what they think you *want* to hear?

Silence is expensive. Creating a culture where your employees can share their opinions, feedback and ideas can boost revenue and help reduce staff turnover.

What most affects an organization's willingness to seek, speak and hear the truth? It's always the leader. Candor culture starts at the top. When your employees don't speak up, it's not their problem — it's yours.

But leaders usually don't know what's being held back. Many carry around beliefs such as:

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE?

- People are fearful of raising issues, even when they think the group is missing an important point.
- Project teams default to seeing things the same way — what they expect to see, not everything that's possible.
- Stories and points of view become operating facts when told often enough, and employees do not take the time to question underlying assumptions.
- Leaders do not welcome new information that threatens the status quo. They discourage employees from speaking up and looking at new facts.
- Employees become passive and choose not to do anything rather than make a mistake.
- Individuals hold offline mini-meetings, rumoring and criticizing, after the meeting.

> ## Companies ranked highest in candor have consistently outperformed the market by an average of 9.5 percent over the past five years.
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> — LJ Rittenhouse 2014 Culture and Candor Survey

- "I'm not an intimidating person."
- "People feel comfortable talking to me."
- "We do a pretty good job of talking openly around here."
- "I regularly ask others for feedback, their input and what they think."

Researchers — and everyone else who's ever had a boss — know leaders don't ask for feedback, input, opinions and ideas as frequently, effectively and credibly as they believe they do. The fallout is leaders — and their teams, projects and sometimes entire businesses — fail.

When there's not an environment of candor, intelligent, loyal, talented professionals at all levels don't speak up about matters they believe are important. They fear rocking the boat, or have given up believing others care what they think. So they don't share information that could help businesses run better, more efficiently and more profitably.

Businesses that have high candor outperform those that don't, because leaders and their employees are stepping up and addressing problems. Employees can freely voice their concerns and insights, leading to higher retention rates.

When leaders and teams can talk openly, problems are resolved in less time and at a lower cost. Managers feel more in control and less overwhelmed by an accumulation of unresolved issues. People take a greater interest in and responsibility for identifying and resolving future problems. And leaders gain access to experience, knowledge, ideas and information far beyond their own by collaborating with their employees.

Soliciting input or feedback directly is much more effective than just being open when it happens to comes your way; inquiry is at the core of creating an open environment. Asking questions is the key to inviting people to open up conversation to the fullest information, greatest meaning and strongest relationships.

The most powerful impact of asking questions is that we stop talking and provide an opportunity for others to express their insights, questions, expertise and concerns. Don't fall into the trap of believing people will come to you with their views. People will speak up more honestly, readily and respectfully when they are asked.

Creating an environment where it's safe to speak up is giving a voice to those we count on to keep us informed and share what's really going on. KT

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HOW TO SUPPORT SPEAKING UP

1. Continuously ask for feedback, input and opinions in every meeting.

2. Authorize everyone to challenge the status quo, test assumptions, revisit decisions and push back.

3. Discuss how you expect others to challenge your ideas and even disagree with you. Provide examples.

4. Call out examples of feedback, input, challenge, disagreement and robust debate when you see it. Thank challengers and publicly acknowledge how much you value their input.

5. Name those people who bring up the undiscussables. Champion their candor and point out their example to others. Comment on the impact, and communicate your ongoing expectations from the entire team.

6. Squelch any behaviors that inhibit straight talk, including manipulative debate, insults, raised voices, ultimatums, threats, sarcasm, inappropriate humor and retaliation.

7. Assure people they don't need to make an ironclad case for every suggestion. Make room for half-baked ideas and "spitballing."

8. Build speaking up competence in everyone by rotating the responsibility in meetings for a different person to ask core questions.