

“We do not err because truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable.”

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize Winner, Soviet Writer and U.S. Citizen

Editors’ Note: Recent NPQ articles on organizational conflict (“Brave Leadership in Organizational Conflict,” by Kenneth Bailey, Winter 2004) and defensive behavior (“Defending Defensiveness,” by Sandra Janoff, Spring 2004) have brought a terrific response from readers throughout the country. It is clear that interpersonal skills and behavior, and the organizational systems that either support or undermine a healthy exchange, continue to be of central concern to people in nonprofits. The following piece by Erline Belton serves as a companion to these other articles, presenting a complementary vision of the group and personal skills that are needed to propel our organizations forward.

We have all experienced the public lie that goes unchallenged. It may be baldly untrue but somehow accepted as the basis for action with life and death consequences. Some of our experience of public lies may be based on differences in values or perceptions, but sometimes what is said just simply violates the facts—this is disheartening and drives people out of public participation.

The same may be said of organizations. A nonprofit may, on the surface, be making every effort to promote teamwork and “the higher good,” but if its people continue to perceive a culture that supports a different and less reliable set of operating norms and assumptions than what is written or espoused, they will not bring themselves wholly to our efforts.

Here are some typical reasons for telling lies:

- to avoid pain or unpleasant consequences;
- to promote self-interest and a particular point of view;
- to protect the leaders or the organization;
- to perpetuate myths that hold the organization or a point of view together;

Regardless of why they are told, untruths and lies can cause people to disengage—and they

can also diminish the spirit people bring into the workplace. This leads to a sometimes massive loss of applied human intellectual and physical capital assets. A disinvestment of human spirit results in what I refer to as a Gross National People Divestiture (GNPD). The GNPD index in any organization or society can be directly related to the prevalence and magnitude of untruths told and allowed to stand. GNPD occurs when your organization's tolerance of untruth creates a climate of cynical disbelief engendering a lack of trust in information and relationships. This automatically creates management problems that are sometimes difficult to put your finger on but are often very powerfully present nonetheless.

Our challenge is to buck the culture and engage people in building a climate of truth telling that will lead to a newly revived work ethic and heightened individual and collective energy. In order to do this effectively, we must understand the conditions that support the emergence of truth, and understand and eliminate those that routinely undermine its presence in our organizations.

Staying Safe: Are You Avoiding Pain, but Inviting Extinction?

According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, our strongest mutual instinct is to be safe from harm and to protect our sense of well-being. It is this instinct that guides us to avoid risk (or what we perceive to be risk), and to respond cautiously to changes in our environment, relying heavily on familiar patterns of behavior in an effort to promote and sustain a sense of equilibrium. As coworkers or managers, this instinct often propels us to play it safe and go along with the program. Ironically, in a quickly changing environment this is obviously counterproductive. Thus, too often, we opt for the illusion of stability in order to promote a sense of psychological well-being. This sense is acquired in exchange for at least a fragment of the whole truth; and since we all know "the truth" is relative anyway, we hardly notice the cost. It is true that we all seek solid ground when in doubt. But does that solid ground need to be sameness? Solid ground might be, for instance, a place to stand for something we can believe in and whose integrity we can rely on when all else appears undependable and unpredictable.

Over time illusions dissolve and evaporate. When they do, those who have used them for grounding are left less safe, less secure than ever. And those who have allowed even the smallest of illusions to inform our management decisions, have placed entire organizations, teams and ourselves at risk.

Because of the diversity of perspectives and information available in any group, a collective organizational "truth" has the potential to be stronger and more accurate than any one individual's truth. But it is only when we have the combination of individual as well as collective

seeking of truth, that organizational potential is realized. This requires an open atmosphere where people can depend upon one another to engage honestly, respectfully, and with spirit intact. It requires the testing of personal assumptions among people and that requires a level of trust.

More often than not, organizational potential is not realized. Why? Team meetings, team coordination, and team feedback all involve a diversity of people and personalities that have at least one thing in common: they don't want to get hurt; they don't want unpleasant things to happen; they want to feel safe; and they want to contribute. We, as fallible individuals create the environment, and environmental conditions can support either truth or lies.

Conditions That Support Untruths

Groupthink: The tendency to just go along with the crowd, avoid drawing criticism to ourselves, and assume that everyone agrees, is so subtle and unconscious that we are generally unaware of it. As a result, we often all wind up somewhere nobody really wanted to be. For instance, imagine the scenario of an organization trying to decide on whether to apply for a major contract. Most staff members are in favor of going forward while a few are privately concerned that the organization does not have the capacity to handle the work or the money. The push toward acquiring the contract is so strong that the isolated few remain silent for fear of being characterized as pessimists or naysayers. The organization lands the contract and finds itself in terrible straits trying to handle the management challenge. One variation on this is situations in which everyone knows something but there is an undercurrent of pressure not to state it aloud. Colluding in lies can be crippling. In one organization I know, the staff was asked about the biggest lie inhabiting the organization. After much hemming and hawing, one man finally blurted out, "The lie is that we provide good services that the community wants. We don't and we treat any client who complains like a troublemaker." He went on to provide examples. Everyone else around the table nodded agreement immediately. Consider the enormous cost of having kept this silent for years! This was a key organization, serving an isolated immigrant community. Unfortunately the dialogue group did not include the executive director or board members who later did not allow the conversation to progress further. This was seven years ago, and to this day, funders see the organization as "chronically in trouble."

Imaginary conflicts: People often choose their words and edit their facts to protect themselves from anticipated reactions. One person's imaginary conflicts can warp the way information is exchanged. In a team, the distortion is amplified by the processes of repetition and groupthink. Eventually, the distorted facts may culminate in a "self-fulfilling prophecy" where our worst fears materialize precisely because we acted in fear. Think about the executive director that everyone soft pedals around for fear of hitting one of her sacred organizational cows. Rather than gently prodding for potential change or aiming for a more open debate about organizational myths, staff members assume that some topics are "off limits" and live in silence with the

uncomfortable consequences. Of course, this only fulfills the idea of the executive director as a leader entrenched in her ways, and prevents her from getting accurate feedback—and so it goes.

Hidden agendas: When individuals have their own interests at heart, or believe that something is true but fail to disclose this fact, seemingly straightforward discussions have a way of going wrong. Unexpected disunity and conflict can undermine team spirit and group confidence, preventing the group from working efficiently and effectively. Self-interest isn't so bad in itself, but when kept underground it acts like a dark matter pulling everything in its direction—down. The most distressing of these situations occur when individuals see themselves as self-righteous warriors using any means necessary in their “struggle for justice.”

The Spectrum of Everyday Lies

Exaggerating or underplaying the truth: This is often done for one's own benefit, for that of the team, or for a teammate. These lies usually reflect (or exceed) desired expected outcomes.

Shading the truth: This is usually done to make a point or to protect yourself, your team, or your teammate. Again, such a lie is used to make the impression that things are more like you want or expect them to be than they actually are. These lies are often used in a noble effort to protect others from the truth.

Beating around the bush or throwing up a smoke screen: This is a delay tactic used to enlarge the insulation or cushion of safety between you and somebody who makes you uncomfortable. This category includes situations in which you withhold an opinion or fail to tell a person where he or she really stands with you for fear of creating complications or undesired reactions. It also includes instances when you fail to say no directly, when no is what you mean.

Pretending certainty or expertise: There is a lot of pressure in the workplace to provide answers now, to know the facts, the status, the scoop. These lies are often passed off as bravado, but they create unfounded expectations and dependencies in others, thus setting them up for unpleasant surprises.

Not letting others know your true position: Especially in times of ambiguity or controversy, there is a temptation to cover yourself by either making your stand unclear, or stating it in such a way

that it sounds as if you are in agreement with others when, in fact, you are not. This is a common feature of groupthink and often leads to outcomes nobody really wanted, but everybody assumed they did!

Consciously withholding relevant information: This is often used as a kind of power play to leverage the value and impact of information that you have. By not fully disclosing your knowledge, you are in fact manipulating people for your own purposes (whatever they may be).

Perceptions of powerlessness: Especially in teams with strong leaders, people may feel they have no legitimate voice and are vulnerable (by proximity) to the “powers that be.” Opting to assume that others know best, some people often let others make choices and decisions for them, and withhold information that might influence the discussion. Once this happens, these people have made themselves powerless to do anything but accept the consequences.

Perceptions of invulnerability: Belonging to a successful team can be exhilarating—so exhilarating that maxims such as “success sows the seeds of its own failure” seem irrelevant and only applicable to somebody else. There is a strong sense of being “in the know” and having a unique advantage over others who are outside the circle of your team. This can lead to carelessness, letting perceptions, communications, and facts slide by without diligent examination and discussion.

Misplaced loyalty or dysfunctional rescuing: Relationships that have longevity often interfere with the ability to be objective about performance, and ultimately one’s competence to do the job. Loyalty to these relationships can cause individuals to look the other way and avoid listening to obvious data that suggests that either the person is in the wrong position, or that it is time to move on. Silence on the issues of lack of performance is a major untruth. If unacknowledged it creates disharmony and reduces leadership’s credibility. Once acknowledged, and once actions have been taken, an environmental unfreezing occurs that revitalizes human spirit and performance.

Failing to give due credit: A common way of self-promotion in a group setting, this denies or diminishes the value of others’ input and contributions. It disempowers people and leads to the inappropriate use of human resources.

Deluding yourself—self-deception: This is perhaps the most common source of everyday lies. You have both conscious and unconscious internal mechanisms that operate to protect you from cold hard facts in the misguided belief that what you don't know won't hurt you. These self-deceptions set you up for hard falls, and introduce faulty information into whatever team dynamic you are part of.

Conditions That Support Truth Telling

Individual examination/accountability: Individual organizations and teams can “build better truths.” Since untruths can be intentional, the truth must be intentional. Collective truth for a team is the result of individual encouragement through consent that is informed, uncompelled, and mutual. The leader has a critical and essential role as role model and must understand that his or her behavior is under more scrutiny and will be given more weight than that of the others. If the leader fails at this, the organizational setting will also fail.

Visible commitment to truth telling: Relentlessly stating that truth telling has value is only the first step. Explaining thoughts, acknowledging the power of our words, and being accountable to one another for our actions will demonstrate that concept. In spite of our fear about telling the truth, relationships can be consistently strengthened with truth as the foundation.

Collective truths and collective responsibility: All team members need to collaborate in a dialogue that sets the foundation for an agreed-upon definition and description of “reality.” This vision of reality is not complete until each member gives explicit consent and can accept the idea that the view of reality presented, even with qualifications, is one that they can sign on to. Once there is ownership and a feeling of collective responsibility, a future can be created. This kind of dialogue requires personal risk, courage, and time.

The Whole Truth: Access to reliable, solid, and truthful information is the one commodity every person, regardless of role or position, needs in order to succeed. As people who live or work together, we require information that is communicated openly and freely. Information based on the “whole truth” informs decisions, actions, behavior, and dialogue to support an outcome. Organizations that support truth telling understand that there are four critical components to the whole truth, and to laying the foundation for achieving outcomes that have meaningful results and credibility: information must be complete, timely, accurate, and true.

Information Flow: Information creates its leaders' legacies and the values they stand for. Consider an organization's values and beliefs in the context of its history and current reality. All

available facts and information (including personal stories, feelings, and visible and invisible reactions) are on the table in an accurate and accessible way; all information is understood and shared.

Free choice, sustained environmental spirit, safety: In organizations that value truth telling, each individual is free to evaluate and decide based solely on the merit of available truthful facts; there isn't even a hint of social, political, or economic coercion. The environment must show evidence that it is "safe" to tell the truth. There must be visible examples of situations where the truth was told, acknowledged, and acted on—and the consequences were not punitive. This does not mean that the truth may not bring a fallout; that could very well happen. People will leave organizations in which they don't fit, and that is a positive thing for the organization and the individuals involved. Running an organization based on truth requires—and demands—the taking of personal risks and time. The perception that time is limited, or the fear that the truth will hurt us, or hurt someone or something we care about, are perhaps the greatest obstacles to organizational truth telling.

Laying a Solid Foundation

Busy men and women are always looking for shortcuts and abbreviations to help speed things along. But truth lies at the very foundation of a successful organization, and you can't lay a solid foundation when you cut corners; doing so places the whole structure in danger of eventual collapse. But if your culture now includes a tolerance for and comfort with lying (as it is described in the above "spectrum"), you have to be explicit about changing your culture and about what the "whole truth" must include. And then you must patiently and persistently inch your way toward it, in practice. Organizational healing and reconciliation are the natural first steps toward restoring a culture where truth telling is a value. It is through the process of making the change as an organization-wide effort that we reclaim the vital human spirit necessary for renewing our organizations, communities and country. Truth telling leads to freedom. Freedom requires that we challenge the way things are in organizations if we truly want them to accomplish what is in our collective hearts.

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Let's Talk

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