

Creating a Culture of Transparency



The impact of trust

You know someone is a great leader when you hear their direct reports say, "I'd go to hell and back for my boss." What behaviors does a leader need to instill that level of trust and loyalty? If we could bottle this formula, imagine the power it would have to transform organizations.

In creating a culture of transparency, a leader's actions and behaviors fabricate a workplace climate that generates trust, engagement, and buy-in from employees. Many books describe systems, modes of communication, and methods to employ to yield higher transparency. Those are important tools, but without a leader consistently behaving in ways that enlist willing employees to accomplish strategic objectives, those approaches are not sufficient. Let's say that again. It isn't systems or procedures that create transparency, it is *your behavior as the leader* that accomplishes that.

Why it matters:

Quint Studer, the author, businessman, and co-owner of the Pensacola Blue Wahoos, believes organizations that create cultures of openness and fluid information will survive better in difficult economies than those who filter the narrative and constrict the flow of knowledge. The reason is that transparency helps employees stay connected emotionally. When they better understand the big picture, they are more creative and solutions-focused and stay grounded in what it takes to execute goals and objectives with excellence. Transparency is part of a strategy for both organizational stability and creating a competitive edge in today's world.

Eight Things Leaders Can Do to Create Transparent Cultures

1. **Show others that you care.** Leaders must daily answer the unspoken question in employees' minds "*Do you care about me?*" When employees feel seen, heard, affirmed, and supported, that question turns into a conviction: "*I will follow you because I know you will help me succeed.*" To do this, leaders must intentionally nurture their relationships with direct reports and ensure that what employees need to develop professionally is provided.

Human beings thrive when personal connections are forged and maintained. Relationship building creates safety, understanding, appreciation, and reliability. What people expect from their leaders is often embedded in these basic interpersonal leader-follower connections. Some leaders mistakenly believe these factors are not necessary in a workplace environment. Nothing could be further from the truth. Once leaders build this platform and maintain it, execution of strategic objectives often flourishes.

2. **Be vulnerable.** Some leaders might wince at that phrase, thinking that it will somehow diminish them in the eyes of their employees. However, most employees greatly appreciate a leader who allows them to get to know their authentic self. Vulnerability demonstrates sincerity of being and builds credibility. It does require leaders to have a certain level of maturity, judgment, and self-awareness, though, to gauge the ability of employees' accurately interpreting and disseminating the information that is revealed.

A key indicator of a vulnerable leader is one who asks for feedback about their own performance. Discovering how others perceive them, can allow leaders to better align their intentions with reality and course correct as needed to continue to build the culture of transparency they desire. Being vulnerable in this way also models for employees that feedback is a powerful tool for improvement and building a high-performance team.

3. **Be fiercely honest.** In our work with employees across campus, at least half reveal that their leaders could be more honest. Today's employees place a premium on workplace environments that remove the fog of unknowns and deficiencies that usually creep into their minds about how decisions are made and the impact on them. When leaders hold onto information, for whatever reason, they erode trust. If leaders don't have all the pieces in place or are waiting on more data to come in, they should say so. This shows respect for employees and understanding of their concern and need for information. This type of honesty goes a long way to eliminating that pervasive feeling that there are hidden agendas.

There is no better role-model than a courageous leader who is willing to be fiercely honest with good news and bad news. This sends the message to your employees that they can handle the information and that they can count on you to connect the dots for them when needed.

4. **Hold the tough conversations.** If you want to be a leader of a mediocre team or organization, then dance around issues of performance. This avoidance results in a loss of confidence and security. It also creates a climate where employees hold back in giving their full commitment. *Why?* Because employees need a workplace environment that does not tolerate uncivil interactions, unproductive gossiping, the blaming of others, and negative behaviors that jeopardize the teams' performance towards goals and objectives. Being a transparent leader means making sure that employees are crystal clear on your commitment to holding those conversations, when needed. There should be no question that inconsiderate and disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.
5. **Pay attention to the mood in the office.** Emotions have a profound effect on just about everything we do in the workplace. They influence our thoughts, behaviors and attitudes. When leaders are transparent about letting employees know they are paying attention to these factors, it sends the message that they are listening, observing, and, yes, caring about the experiences employees are having within the workplace. It also reinforces a leader's awareness of how their own moods can "infect" or "affect" the team, both positively and negatively.
6. **Keep your promises.** Leaders who keep their promises on the little things build trust for the big things. This sets the tone for the entire organization. Showing up on time for meetings, returning emails promptly, and following up on requests you have made of employees are examples of the little things. Being a transparent leader in this area means that you are communicating your promises clearly and cleanly so there are no misunderstandings. You avoid using vague language, such as "I will try to make the meeting," or "You will hear from me ASAP." And you model for your employees how using language that is specific increases levels of accountability.
7. **Be composed.** Leaders who have self-control, poise, and patience minimize workplace anxiety and uncertainty. A leader's composure is reflected in their attitude, body language and overall presence. Even in the most pressure-packed

moments, leaders can acknowledge that a problem is happening and remain calm. Employees are always watching their leaders, especially in difficult times, so staying strong and confident, smiling often and authentically showing a sense of compassion neutralizes workplace chaos and creates certainty that a confident, caring, and fearless leader is in charge.

8. **Deliver bad news well.** Yes, as leaders, there are times that do try our souls. But leaders who downplay tough situations, blame others, or flat-out lie about them are not creating cultures of transparency. Delivering bad news well demonstrates courage, showing that you are a leader who, despite being personally uncomfortable, will do things for the good of the organization and team. Bad news is usually obvious to everyone, so addressing it quickly with employees is critical. Say as much as you can to employees without divulging confidences and don't play the blame game. When employees voice concern or appear upset, listen to them so they feel that you are "in it with them" and not throwing a mess on them and walking away. Make sure employees know what the steps are to correct a situation and communicate often on where you are in the process of mitigation.

Conclusion

When employees feel they work in an organization where there are no secrets, they are more connected and invested in the outcomes, feeling they work in a relationship-based environment. This means no secrets about cash flow, hours worked, what to wear to work, how promotions are handled, goals and roadmaps, performance expectations, and the value that each team member brings to the table. Being transparent isn't something you do just once and forget about it. You must remain constant and consistent. While transparency isn't always easy and can open leaders up to being wrong and being judged, its benefits far outweigh the risks. Over time, leaders see the power of transparency and the positive impact it has on everything they do.

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