University of Florida Training and Organizational Development, Office of Human Resource Services

Transparency

Podcast Transcript

Have you ever wondered, "Why did my boss make a certain decision?"

As a leader, do you explain your own decisions to others?

Think about your workplace. Do people engage in open and honest communication with each other?

Is your workplace environment one that does not tolerate hidden agendas, manipulation, and dirty politics?

If you answered "No" to any of these questions, you may want to consider how embracing a culture of transparency and trust can increase loyalty, engagement and productivity throughout your organization.

In this episode of Reflections on Leadership, we will explore the influence effective and ineffective transparency can have on working relationships.

Organizations with a transparent culture are more successful because employees feel free to come up with more creative solutions to problems, and they share issues before they become major problems. Employees also tend to be more engaged, motivated, productive, and satisfied with their work.

We're going to examine seven strategies leaders can use to create a culture of transparency with their employees and peers. These strategies are not the only ways a relationship of trust can be built, but we will focus on them in this episode.

Strategies for Transparency

1. **Be Honest and Forthcoming**
   Share as much information as you can as soon as you can. Make sure the message is reaching everyone involved. Doing this will reduce anxiety and give employees better information.
2. **Encourage Questions**
   After giving information to others, invite them to ask questions. By doing so, you will model transparency and openness. Prepare others who have to deliver your message to handle tough questions as well.
3. **Be Respectful**
   Be respectful to everyone, always. Treating others with respect establishes trust. Mark Graybill says that a personable, approachable, and respectful attitude should also be used when counseling or while taking disciplinary action and disrespect should never be used to punish.
4. **Hold Tough Conversations with Composure**
   Engaging in difficult conversations respectfully encourages open and honest dialogue.

5. **Give Feedback in a Timely Manner**
   Meet with employees on a regular basis and promptly address any gaps in communication or feedback on performance. Procrastination can lead to misinformation, mistakes, and missed opportunities for growth.

6. **Show Others you Care**
   Sincerity from leadership is essential to building trust. One way for leaders to show employees that they are one of the most valuable resources within an organization is to help them set an aspirational goal based on what they consider important and support the steps necessary to achieve that goal.

7. **Keep your Promises**
   Following through on the commitments you make builds trust with employees, peers, and leaders.

If employees don't know what is happening around them, they have the tendency to misunderstand or misread leaders' intentions and possibly think the worst. Joyce E. A. Russell says, "People inevitably build a backstory for leadership decisions, and whether they trust you or not is the most significant determinant of whether that story will be positive or negative." Listen to the following scenarios. See which leader communicates in a way that promotes transparency with others. We have included questions for reflection after each scenario. Let them guide your thinking about how to promote transparency.

[*Music transition*]

Scenario One

In this first scenario, we have Paul Holton, an associate director in a support unit and Rachel Moss, a division manager. The university purchased a new software that will automate some processes that used to be done manually. As a result, two closely-related divisions will be consolidated into one. This means staffing for the new division will be restructured as well. Listen for times when Paul and Rachel are honest and forthcoming, encourage questions, and keep their promises as they discuss what might happen.

Paul: Rachel, thank you for making time to meet with me. Please, come in.

Rachel: Sure. I want to hear more about what's going on.

Paul: Have a seat. So, in our last meeting, I told you I would give you information about the division merger and at this point, I've met with the Director. She has given us more information and directives. I want to answer any questions you may have before we meet with the rest of our staff.

Rachel: Okay. What new information do you have?

Paul: Well, what we know is the new division is expected to begin functioning July first next year. We are officially moving into Phase 2 of the process so that we can keep to that timeline. In December, Information Systems will relocate to our Midtown location to be closer to Data and Analytics. As far as staff goes, we won't be able to keep everyone. So, some of our support staff will transfer to different departments.

Rachel: Do you know how many people we will get to keep? How many will we lose?

Paul: You'll retain 3 staff positions, 4 specialists and 1 technician from Data and Analytics. Information systems will keep 3 staff positions and 5 technicians.

Rachel: Oh! I wasn't expecting to lose five positions. I don't know how the team will handle that. Our work load isn't high enough to keep more people?

Paul: I thought we would get to keep a few more people as well, but no. From what I understand, we're going down to essential numbers. With this new system, there are many processes we don't have to do anymore and we don't need as many people to support them.

Rachel: Do you know how division leadership will be affected by consolidation yet?

Paul: I have an idea about what may happen, but it is too early to say for sure. Look, I don't want to misinform you. We'll start having one-on-one conversations with supervisors before we take them to the whole group. I know you must feel some anxiety about where your place will be in the new division.

Rachel: Yes, I do. Mostly because I want to be in a position to advocate for my staff. It is bad enough I have to lose some team members. I don't want to negatively affect the staff and specialists who stay, either.

Paul: Budget constraints have tied our hands. Look, there <u>are</u> other departments with vacant positions that need to be filled. I can't promise that everything will go perfectly, but we will try to make this happen as smoothly as possible. We want everyone's strengths to complement the direction of the new division.

Rachel: People expressed concerns before and they'll certainly have some now. Everyone will probably be scared and on edge. How will leadership explain this to the staff members?

Reflection

How well do you think this conversation went?

Do you think Paul was forthcoming enough with Rachel? Why or why not?

What do you think the leadership team should do to explain these changes to the rest of the staff?

This narrative demonstrates some of the best practices for communicating with transparency. Paul was forthcoming and honest with Rachel by giving her information when it was ready to be shared. He answered her questions truthfully and he refrained from giving her conjecture about decisions that had not been made yet. If the decisions upper management makes don't reflect what Paul told Rachel, he would need to have a difficult conversation with her in the future. Telling Rachel about losing some of her direct reports is a tough topic to talk about, but Paul held his composure and discussed it with respect and compassion for how she was feeling.

[*Music transition*]

Scenario Two

In our second scenario, we will listen in on a conversation between Dr. Stephanie Pruitt and Dr. Jeffery Forbes. They are discussing a situation that has arisen because they were not transparent with each other or their research assistants. Listen for areas where Stephanie and Jeffrey could improve on how they have tough conversations, give timely and appropriate feedback, and seek facts without assigning blame.

Jeffery: Stephanie, I hate to tell you this, but a little over 200 of our specimens have been damaged. We need to dispose of them and start a new collection cycle.

Stephanie: What?! How did this happen?

Jeffery: The assistants have been using the wrong concentration of industrial alcohol to preserve the specimens.

Stephanie: I trained them on this at the beginning of the year. How could they have made this mistake?

Jeffery: I don't know. I gave Maggie and James the revised procedure guide when we resumed research after the break. Apparently, they didn't see the changes. Looking at the number of damaged samples, they've been using the wrong concentration for months!

Stephanie: I don't understand why you didn't check to make sure they knew the new procedures! You really dropped the ball on this one!

Jeffery: Me?! I told both of them to pay attention to what they're doing. I've spoken to Maggie several times to remind her about storing samples at the correct temperature. *You're* the one in charge of procedures. This is not my fault!

Stephanie: Why didn't you say anything to me sooner? We could have corrected them before this escalated, Jeffrey.

Jeffery: *I* shouldn't have to talk to them about every little thing. This is *our* research. I'm just as busy as you are. Maybe if you were more involved with the assistants, things like this wouldn't happen.

Stephanie: Fine. It's too late to do anything about it now. We can give Maggie and James different assignments until I speak to each of them during their annual reviews next month.

Reflection

How do you feel this conversation went?

What do you think about Dr. Pruitt's plan to speak with the research assistants at their annual reviews?

How do you go about having tough conversations with your peers and your employees?

In this exchange, Dr. Pruitt and Dr. Forbes have placed blame on each other for not supervising their research assistants' work. Let's consider a few ways transparency could have been used to better handle this situation. They have become focused on the immediate issue at hand and have lost sight on how they can find solutions to their problem. Once Dr. Pruitt took on an accusatory tone with Dr. Forbes, he became defensive and the tone of their conversation escalated. If Maggie and James were storing specimens incorrectly, they should have been redirected as soon as Dr. Forbes and Dr. Pruitt identified the problem. This type of feedback is most effective when it is given in a timely manner and should not be saved until an annual performance review.

[*Music transition*]

Conclusion

Transparency involves clear and consistent communication and a commitment to creating an open and honest workplace with trust at the core of the culture. Employees are not mind readers! When leaders implement critical changes in policy or procedure, they must communicate about those changes. In fact, they should often follow-up written communication with face-to-face communications that allow the opportunity for employees to ask questions.

Also, providing feedback in a timely and supportive way is critical to creating an environment of transparency and trust. If Dr. Pruitt or Dr. Forbes had sat down with Maggie at the time of the change—or, at the least, when they first noticed problems, mistakes and mistrust could have been avoided. Transparent feedback is a year-round activity—not something to be delivered once a year. Being transparent in a timely fashion and as a regular practice prevents small problems from becoming big problems. It benefits both parties. A manager is able to "get something off of his/her chest" in a productive manner and the direct report gets timely and helpful feedback that redirects and improves performance.

In this episode, we listened to conversations that can occur in the workplace more often than we think. Embracing transparency in the workplace can create an environment where employees and employers trust each other and work toward achieving organizational goals.

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