

## Speaking Up...

### How do you know if your Open Door Policy is actually working?

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There is an intelligence goldmine in the employee ranks and taking advantage of it could be the most cost effective way to improve profits and create some psychological slack to increase work life enjoyment. Increasingly employees find it difficult to speak up to managers about sensitive situations they are involved in or know about. The Speaking Up study identifies many situations in which people have information that would benefit the company if this knowledge or perspective could be incorporated into decision making. Productivity and profits can increase and stress at work can decrease if the gap between what employees and managers know is shortened. This is true whether or not the issue is about personnel or processes.

As a way to explore this phenomena Virginia Darrell and Lunell Haught surveyed 125 employees in eastern Washington area companies (two thirds for profit, the remainder non-profit or government), with more than two thirds aged over 40, 80% female. Participants were asked about what was difficult for employees to tell their supervisors, what supervisors didn't like hearing, why there wasn't more upward communication, and how open door policies were perceived and used.

#### **Myth of the Open Door Policy**

There were pockets of feedback-rich cultures, but the research showed an impressive opportunity to improve cultures to make them more positive and productive. Almost all managers and most employees in the study believe they have an 'open door policy' and most (85%) use it.

Successful organizational cultures were notable because of the contrast between comments from their employees and those in less safe and open environments. What appears to be happening with most, however is a case of cognitive dissonance. Managers believe

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they are open, but there are issues they really don't want to hear about. And they are convincing employees they don't want to hear it, but in a fairly unconscious way. This discrepancy shows up in a variety of ways in the organization's culture. Managers have a hard time hearing about how their management style impacts those they manage. Almost all managers (94%) would find it difficult to hear anything negative about their own performance as a manager.

### **Management style impact**

Key feedback on management styles impacting staff engagement, productivity and retention is difficult for them. Only 6% reported a willingness to hear how their supervision was impacting a staff person. More than half had trouble hearing about difficulties with deadlines or not having enough information to do a job. Most (65%) have trouble hearing about a difficult employee who has a negative impact on the work group. When it came to hearing about issues impacting the company, only 6% reported inviting feedback so they could address the problem, with 75% reporting they had trouble hearing about an organizational change that wasn't working well. Understandably, managers expressed frustration when they couldn't do anything about the issue employees brought to them

Apparently managers know they are supposed to either hear or do something about these situations; however, their own communication skill, self image; or inability to impact an outcome keeps them from successfully hearing and acting on this information. Managers indicated they would like to hear the information in a direct, straightforward way, which is how most employees prefer to give it. This indicates even using the preferred style, hearing about difficulties is still unwelcome news. An example of the 'disconnect'. Employees who can't be direct (10%) use joking as a way to make a point. Those who joke or don't say anything suggest either fear (of retribution, looking foolish, etc.) or lack of

skill communicating sensitive information. It seems to be a case of not quite walking the talk, having the idea one is direct and helpful, but the experience is quite different. A non-profit 50-something male manager summed up with not wanting to hear he “lacked holding people accountable and lacked providing direction.”

### **Employee experience**

From the employee perspective, more than 85 percent had trouble sharing information about their work; trouble with deadlines (25%) and having enough information to do their work (35%) The most difficult news to deliver to a manager from the employee was about the impact of the management style. This issue came up more frequently with non profits than for profits or government groups. Examples ranged from micromanaging (a sign of a training issue for both employee and supervisor) to taking credit for work. Creating a more effective relationship is a challenge, and without an intentional strategy for improvement, much talent, ability, and enthusiasm for work is lost. This is not to say employees ‘know all the answers’ but if management can’t get employee answers on the table, there will be no way to determine if they are useful or not.

Sharing information about another employee’s impact on the group is also difficult, with about 80% expressing reluctance in this area. Respondents were equally split between addressing the impact of an employee whether s/he was negative or inept. Regardless of the reason, employees don’t like to pass on difficult information and some refer to it as tattling. Addressing the difference between gossip, tattling and providing useful information about a co-workers work would help this situation.

### **Fairness**

Other employees are the source of fairness issues. One employee, representing many comments, noted “Work habits, ‘double standard’ expectations outside of our team are high but one individual inside team is not expected to have same standard.”

**Double standard expectations...**

Another fifty-something female wrote, “not everyone is

working off the same page of rules.” While a fifty-something government manager wrote, “The employee is a good worker, but personality and communication style does not fit the group and impacts the

department.”

Finally, high on the list was difficulty in telling about the company itself. Organizational changes not going well (60%) was the most difficult to convey. One respondent noted, “From the top down, managers/employees fear confrontation. So they ignore things until they’re catastrophic. Or they sugar coat criticism so much that the real message is never delivered or understood.” Another would not tell “anything that was his idea that isn’t working. We don’t seem to want to get too organized. We lack leadership, direction and accountability.” All these comments reveal a concern that could be the impetus for improvements projects, whether or not the respondent has the ‘right’ answer.

### **Some companies have employees who speak up**

Compare these responses with “We openly discuss the positive and areas of improvement related to the company” and “You can talk to any person in the management that you believe will help with your issue. You do not necessarily need to talk to your own boss first.” Other employees wrote “They always have time to speak to employees...they may have to schedule time at a later date but they are always willing to listen and speak to employees,” and “you can talk to them or bring any issue to them without judgment , with the expectation of receiving direction and help.” The latter work in companies that activate employee knowledge. This allows for productivity and personnel contributions which bring financial and social results to the organization. These are feedback rich cultures.

### **The disconnect**

The disconnect of “I have an open door policy” and “I don’t tell my manager” seems to be grounded in managers not being competent or effective in receiving and evaluating feedback. This probably implies a lack of ability on the part of the employee as well, which contributes to their fearfulness. Employees reported it is hard or impossible for employees to say when they are having trouble with completing an assignment on time, how they could be more produc-

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tive if supervised differently or the impact of a negative person in the workplace. The tension between being a tattler and trying to improve the workplace is important, and the unfairness and lack of clarity themes are complicated. Disconcertingly, employees are fearful of the problem not being fixed (67%); demotion or loss of job (28%) and retaliation from a supervisor (35%). Of those, 78% reported actually experienced retaliation. One respondent said, “I am afraid I will be cut off and isolated from future projects/problem solving sessions because I asked hard questions.”

For those companies that do not have good feedback systems and a supportive workplace, the main idea emerging from this study is how important it is to be able to improve situations or problem solve without supervisors feeling defensive, inadequate or even more stressed. Quite a few employees had unexpressed opinions about how money could be saved on initiatives, as well as underfunded projects that would result in not benefiting from the investment made. Companies should be trying to create mechanisms to take advantage of what both employees and managers know. This falls squarely in the realm of organizational development, typically the domain of Human Resources and Training, supported by organizational leaders.

### **What Human Resource professionals and managers can do**

Human Resource professionals can work with managers and employees to create a culture in which feedback and action is normal. Cultures in which there is a distinction between informers who want to detect situations needing resolution and complainers, who don't seem to want solutions, much less be part of them. Informers provide information about the current status which could be quite useful to management. Of greatest value are those forecasters who understand the situation and can play out a scenario so management can look at 'what if' situations and problem solve before the problem becomes unsolvable. It isn't just a case of teaching someone to be more assertive, only to have the manager not want to hear it. It means changing how managers see themselves in their role. It really is a culture shift in those companies whose operating practice is avoidance and accommodation.

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The survey shows work resources are limited. This includes time, smooth processes, knowledge and information about ‘what’s going on’, as well as training, and negative people who impact work. Respondents reported some initiatives fail because the company has “cut so close to the bone it can’t achieve its goals.” All this information could benefit the company by using resources more fully. The quality or style of supervision and management will make a real difference for workers and the company.

### **Make feedback rich workplaces normal**

The overriding idea is to normalize feedback as information about the work and its impact, not about the workers. This doesn’t mean avoid all people talk, but it puts people talk in the context of work. Almost all managers believe they have an open door policy, so their self-image is that they are open to ideas. Qualifying what is meant by an open door policy is crucial. Creating an understanding or working agreement with staff sets a tone of problem solving and situation analysis instead of blame and frustration. The agreements can be very specific, ‘this is how I want to hear about my impact on your work’, and ‘this is how I want to tell you about the impact of your work on me.’ This is totally outside the performance review discussion, it happens routinely and is assumed, it doesn’t have to be special.

An opening question to managers from the Human Resource or leader perspective is, “If you got feedback that would help you be more effective would you want it? Would you like to work with me to make sure your work group gives you what you need so your group can be more productive?” This approach is essential because it becomes the basis for further work. A manager might say, “I don’t want to hear I’m a bad manager. But if we have an agreement that allows for us to talk about how we impact each other’s work, I may be able to hear something.”

The discussion becomes about the work instead of about ‘me’. After creating the foundation for this type of feedback – more than just saying

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‘I have an open door’, these are the eight elements staff in Organizational Development and or Human Resources can teach or reinforce.

## **Eight steps to Speaking Up**

### **1. Employees can engage managers in problem solving.**

Employees have a different perspective than managers, and there is value in both. For example, managers are generally more aware of market trends, costs of doing business, etc. Staff may be more aware of on-the-ground barriers to productivity or effectiveness. Cooperative situation analysis and problem solving generates more ideas and serves to educate both parties. Instead of just saying 'yes' to their supervisors and not getting a project finished on time or having enough information to do a good job, employees can learn to say something like "What changes can we make to my current workload so I have more time for your project?" Managers know cost, time, and quality are interconnected, but are not always aware of barriers to getting the work done. Managers and employees working together on problems helps everyone involved understand the situation more fully. Managers need to build a cooperative problem-solving culture.

### **2. Employees can describe the specific situation and behavior desired.**

Just saying 'be nicer' or 'don't be mean' doesn't convey meaning. Most people believe they are nice and not mean. However, If the employee said 'When you assign work without knowing what I'm already working on I think you aren't interested in what I accomplish or how I've planned my day.' This conveys a definite message about how an employee prefers to work and can help the manager achieve team results without alienating the employee. And the manager knows exactly what the employee means.

Managers believe either they are not micromanaging or they believe they have to. This is usually a sign of a training need or a manager who is unclear about what the job of management really is. An employee could approach the manager and inquire "what milestones do you have for this, how do you want me to tell you when I hit them or if I'm going to miss." The point is to give the employee control of the feedback. What if it doesn't happen? It won't always – just keep practicing this approach and discuss how it's going. Ask them what they learned from the situation and how they plan to approach it differently in the future. Do not default to 'tried it once'. Learning new behaviors first requires unlearning the old ones.

### **3. Employees need to feel “in on things.”**

A Gallup Study, repeated routinely since the 1940s, continuously finds this to be one of the top four aspects of job satisfaction. Take advantage of this – it’s almost free, and can make a big difference in the workplace in terms of satisfaction and effectiveness. In the survey results, roughly a third of employees didn’t have enough information to do their work. Besides impacting performance, the result was frustration and apparent lack of respect on both sides. Employees need to see the whole picture. Get out of ‘need to know’ and get into ‘what’s to know’. Of course, there are issues that are confidential, such as Human Resource actions, but the idea is to share work-relevant information with staff. Not only will it increase their value to the organization in their current role, but is an investment in them for the future.

### **4. Managers can learn how to improve processes and engage employees in this activity.**

When everyone is together, facing a board on which a process is being described, all contributing to making it better it’s a team building experience. That’s quite different from an accusation that ‘your work isn’t helping’. Team and process mapping information is easily available, it can be tried without expert advice. A ‘let’s learn this together’ mode invites all to believe they don’t have to be an expert. It makes discovery, figuring things out and making mistakes normal so no one has to feel foolish for suggesting something that doesn’t work. If all ideas are shut down the good ones don’t stand a chance of getting through. When teams learn together the gains and the potential to reduce costs and improve rapidly is reinforced.

### **5. Have a frank staff talk about work/privacy policy.**

In fact, have a frank talk about the kind of workplace (culture) people want to work in. This is the root of some fairness issues. When someone is being coached, disciplined, or on probation, it may appear unfair because the other employees don’t think anything is happening. This probably isn’t true. Acknowledging this confidentiality and memorializing it in the working agreement is a good reminder for people. Create a working agreement that specifies what is okay and not okay to do. This is not the

formal policies and procedures, but general expectations people have about what it will be like to work in a particular group/team/department.

Retaliation and unfairness are a workplace concern, and it appears employees have experience with it. This sensitive subject would benefit from a conversation about what fairness is to the staff. It has different definitions. The benefit of the conversation is to open employees and managers' eyes and ears to the many different perspectives involved. For example: vacations should be first come first served, by seniority, first for those who have children, done like a football pool. Any number of methods are possible. Managers need hyper vigilance about this. They might even over explain why some things are happening, just to diffuse the perception of favoritism. Everyone shouldn't be treated the same, but everyone should be treated fairly; employees should know and understand the difference.

#### **6. Do something about negative people in the workplace.**

This is an area of particular expertise for Human Resource professionals...most have a fair knowledge of working with people and there are good resources available. There is reliable data about the impact of this negativity; brain research shows it is demoralizing, debilitating, contagious, and costly. It has to be changed or routed out. The main point here is employees must fix or forget these individuals. Spending time every few months going over whatever egregious behavior one perpetrated is not a good use of anyone's time. Therapeutic venting rarely results in anyone feeling a lot better, and it spreads distress through an organization. If someone spends inordinate time using another in this way, one might wonder about co-dependence.

#### **7. Managers learn to ask "what would you like me to do?"**

If the answer is "I was just venting" managers need to ask if it was helpful. There are excellent problem analysis tools, teach people to use them. The standard questions when presented with a problem: 'where does it happen, when does it happen' are great ways to begin. Some insist employees have a solution when they arrive at the manager's door. An alternative is to hear the problem and assign a task group or actually work through the problem with the employee. Does the employee need the manager's clout, budget, and thinking process? Ask "what exactly is needed?"

## **8. Ask how employees want to be managed – worked with.**

Something as simple as a 'do this, don't do that' chart is an excellent tool to help clarify what works for people. Some want lots of affirmation, some want to be left alone, other's need feedback daily, some need jelly beans. People tend to not want to ask directly yet it would save time and energy to actually find out what works with whom. For example, in one company staff in one department is at wits end because the manager insists on 'visiting and checking in with employees so regularly he has become a disruptive element, with the mistaken idea that 'contact' is a good thing. One wonders if he's attended a workshop that didn't clarify the importance of finding out what works best with your particular employees.

This research shows some places are doing great; they are model organizations. Comparing with others, one can see some companies are sitting on a gold mine. With the help of Human Resource and organizational development professionals who are in for the long haul, companies can design and implement the kind of culture change needed to create to a more feedback rich environment. This will bring more profit and less stress to companies, and perhaps more importantly, to the people who live and work in them.

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