Smashing the communication silence

Rebecca Davis examines the need for communication, dialogue and trust within organisations and how pioneering programmes are developing strategies to smash the culture of silence that impedes progress

The simple act of silence, usually perceived as an act of peacefulness, can be a dangerous territory. For a senior leader in any organisation, silence can be a cause for alarm, but in a public sector setting it has the potential to be catastrophic.

In the past 12 months, we have seen many cases of scandals erupting in various public services where either individuals or groups of individuals were able to act outside the boundaries of what is acceptable or legal, leaving people vulnerable, not receiving the services they should or at worse, victims of a criminal act.

The root cause of this often stems from a culture of silence in an organisation, where people did not feel able to speak up, or when they did, they were not listened to and the magnitude of what they were saying was not fully appreciated or acted upon.

There have been many cases in the news in recent weeks that have reminded us of the importance of ethics and speaking 'truth to power'.

As the regional employers' organisation, my team often have to manage sensitive situations and share difficult messages. It is hard and can leave you out on a limb, exposed and in need of reassurance and support that you're doing the right thing.

As leaders we need to do more to really understand the barriers to creating open cultures within an organisation in which our senior officers and political leaders are trusted executives.

We often explore with managers how they build trust, and we commonly hear responses that cite 'being visible, approachable and having an open-door policy' as a leader's approach to this. This can however miss the mark in capturing the depth and complexity of the issue managers at all levels will face.

Truth and power are inexplicably linked and no 'open-door policy' alone will ever succeed in gathering vital intelligence in isolation. In fact, research suggests this actually has the opposite effect and can imply power and status, in that you 'have a door metaphorically and can choose to open or close it'.

Employees will naturally be cautions engaging with managers and senior leaders and will only ever disclose what they think is safe or politically

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acceptable. It takes time to show you act upon what you hear and in doing so, this builds confidence for others to see.

Speaking up sometimes may appear frivolous, but giving a voice to concern can save a lot of harm. Consider the study by Professor Megan Rietz from Ashridge Executive Education, research aimed at understanding the barriers to 'employee voice initiatives' being successful and to look at what limitations are present that thwart an organisation's ability to really listen and not just hear the feedback.

In her book, *Speak Up*, Professor Rietz's research highlighted two themes that are key tactics for transforming a culture of silence, into a culture of dialogue, themes that seem particularly relevant to us in the public sector:

Recognise that speaking up is relational and social. We often rely on formality and structure within the public sector to reflect the

level of regulation and scrutiny our services are under. This is counter-intuitive to what people need to help develop alternative habits of conversation, where open and constructive dialogue can take place. Building time into busy meetings and diaries for 'dialogue' is important, the concept of 'walking the floor' to be visible is not enough on its own for meaningful dialogue to take place where hierarchy is removed, and trust grown.

In some organisations 'skip level meetings' have been introduced for leaders to normalise engagement and provide feedback across tiers within an organisation, so people aren't just asked for their views when there is a crisis or issue.

Invite dialogue and focus on developing and tracking behaviours associated with 'trust' to really focus on where leaders need to do more.

The Trusted Executive Foundation work by Dr John Blakey indicated that in comparison to employees of low trust organisations, employees of high trust organisations report 74% less stress, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days and 76% more engagement.

This triple bottom line benefit of having a high-trust culture provides a strong business case for investing in leadership development. West Midlands Employers has adopted a 360-degree feedback tool based on the Trusted Executive model to measure how leaders are rated around trust.

'Listening up' is as important as 'speaking up'. Managers need to understand the nuances of the signals they are sending and the way their actions are magnified. Often managers don't realise how closed they can be to really listening to what people have to say. Holding a mirror up to behaviours can often be uncomfortable, but essential to change them.

Managers can often ask people to 'speak up' in events or meetings, but at the same time can give subtle 'shut up' signals, such as looking at a phone or ducking in and out of the session for other meetings.

There are some great examples of organisations doing 'speaking up' well by linking it to organisational learning. The work the NHS is doing in creating 'just and learning cultures' and specifically the work at Mersey Care with Professor Sidney Decker has revolutionised the organisation's culture. It has introduced 'Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' in the workplace that has given people permission and safety to share concerns. Alongside this, all managers have clear development plans to increase psychological safety and develop a learning culture in their team.

As a senior leader, silence can be an alarm bell. Reflecting on how your organisation is listening and learning can be a starting point to building a high trust culture. ∎

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