

Can **We** Talk?

How to Foster Honest, Open Communication

By David Lee

If you want high levels of employee engagement, morale and performance, and if you want to cut down on negativity in the workplace, then you need your management team to know something most people do not know how to do:

Make it safe for people – especially those with less power – to speak openly about what’s on their mind.

Why is this so important? The answer can be found in your own work experience and in the “workplace war stories” you have heard from others. Think for a moment about your own experience as an employee. Have you ever had a boss who:

1. Frequently interrupted you?
2. Didn’t listen?
3. Required you to work over the weekend, or some other “above and beyond the call of duty” task, and never bothered to thank you?
4. Spoke to you in a rude or overbearing way?
5. Micromanaged?



Think of how many of those situations happened without your saying something about it. Anyone who has been in the workplace for any length of time has a whole collection of these incidents. Most people only speak up about a small fraction of these occurrences for obvious reasons. We learn to “pick our battles” and “grin and bear it.”

The problem about this for managers and for employers is that each time this happens, employee morale and motivation diminish. While the employee might not speak up, they feel a little less interested in contributing to their employer’s success, a little less interested in going the extra mile – in short, a little less engaged.

The cumulative effect of these interactions is a workforce with low levels of employee engagement.

SINCE SO FEW EMPLOYEES REPORT BEING ENGAGED, WE CANNOT AFFORD TO CREATE LOWER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Gallup’s research shows that only 26 percent of the workforce reports high levels of engagement, and 55 percent are essentially going through the motions (i.e. disengaged). Think of the ramifications of such low employee engagement. Imagine a professional sports team trying to compete with only 26 percent of its players caring about whether they win.

Employee engagement is even more important during difficult economic times, according to research by Watson Wyatt Worldwide. Its research revealed that companies with highly engaged employees demonstrated 200 percent greater profitability than companies with low engagement during the difficult economic period in the first part of this century.

Because the consequences of low employee engagement are huge, no employer can afford the cost of ongoing employee/ employer interactions that diminish engagement.

TO BUILD EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT, MAKE IT SAFE FOR EMPLOYEES TO SPEAK UP

Listening over the years to employees in focus groups vent about negative interactions they had with their boss or grievances with their employer that were months or years old has impressed upon me the importance of making it safe for employees to speak up. While the incident might have happened long ago, they were still feeling hurt, angry and resentful. The incident was still a raw wound for them. Usually, the employee had never confronted their boss about the incident or, if it was an organizational change or policy that angered them, they had never voiced their concerns to HR or management.

The result? They remained stuck and disengaged, while their boss and/or their employer remained in the dark about what they had done or were doing that was damaging morale and engagement.

If the employees felt safe enough to speak up and discuss such issues, much of the negativity that plagues many workplaces would disappear. Employees would be more likely to move on and once again focus all their energy on making a contribution.

EVEN GREAT MANAGERS NEED FEEDBACK

It is not just thoughtless or rude behaviors that managers need to hear about from their employees. It is also the ineffective, counterproductive management practices that even the most well-intentioned managers unknowingly engage in. We are all imperfect; even excellent managers inadvertently do things that annoy and frustrate their employees, or make it harder for them to do their jobs well.

But, just like the person with bad breath does not realize it until someone points it out, we do not recognize what we are doing that’s counterproductive unless we get feedback.

HOW TO GET USEFUL FEEDBACK BY SIGNALING THAT HONESTY IS WELCOME

Let me give you an example of this in action.

Recently, a manager at a seminar shared a great example of what I believe is one of the most powerful communication devices for making it safe for people to speak up – especially when the other person has less position power than you.

He did what I call “Mentioning the Unmentionable.”

This manager worked in a company that was going through some significant changes, and the management team wanted to make sure their employees were on board with them. To help in this effort, they wanted to learn how to make it comfortable for their people to speak up about their concerns.

This manager, Steve, shared how he learned about signaling to employees that he values honest, open discussion. After getting the results from the company’s employee satisfaction survey, he went to his team and let them know that there were some general perceptions employees had about their managers that he was concerned about, and wanted to check with them to see if he was doing anything that bothered them.

His request was greeted with silence. Rather than offer an awkward, “Ahhhhh, OK, well... if there is anything, let me know” and scurrying on to the next subject, he Mentioned the Unmentionable.

He said, “Well let me ask you this: One of the areas mentioned in the survey was that employees felt like their supervisor did too much micromanaging. Do you feel like I get too involved in your projects?”

Heads started to nod. Then people started talking.

By asking them about this specific issue, rather than just leaving it as a generic “Is there anything I am doing that bothers you?” question, he sent the message: “It is OK to talk about this.”

YOU NEED TO LET THEM KNOW “IT IS OK TO TALK ABOUT THIS”

By putting a potentially touchy topic on the table, you give the person with less power permission to talk about it.

You might think, “I am not an intimidating individual. They do not need my permission to bring up an issue!” We often forget that while we might not feel like we seem imposing or intimidating, if our position carries power, that has an effect on most people in terms of what they will – and will not – share with us.

Mentioning the Unmentionable helps reduce their reluctance because it lets them know you are open to talking about the issue you just “mentioned.”

THIS IS ALSO REALLY USEFUL FOR PARENTS

If you're a parent, I highly recommend you use this communication pattern with your children to make it safe for them to speak up. This is especially useful for children with sensitive personalities and when they are small, and more likely to see an adult as an imposing figure.

I have had a number of situations over the years with my daughter where I reacted to something she did or said with more intensity than was warranted or I could see from her facial expression that my scolding her for something confused or hurt her.

When I have followed up with Mentioning the Unmentionable, such as “Are you wondering ‘Why was Dad all bent out of shape about that?’” or some similar question that puts words to what she might be thinking, I have been amazed by how much I learned from her responses.

IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT CLARIFICATION, IT IS ABOUT STRENGTHENING THE RELATIONSHIP

Not only does this give you useful information, it also strengthens your relationship because it communicates: “I care about how I affect you. I do not think that just because I am the boss (or parent), I get to act any way I want and you just have to learn how to deal with me.”

BUT WHAT IF YOU DISAGREE WITH THEIR PERCEPTION?

Now, just because the other person shares their point of view or their feelings about an issue, does not mean that your response is to change, based on their feedback. While it might mean you change your position or decision, it could mean that you need to explain more clearly your intention, or the reasoning behind your actions.

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So for instance, if you notice the expression on an employee's face looks hurt after you give her some negative feedback, and you ask her if she feels your feedback is unfair or inaccurate, and she says, “Yes, I do,” that does not mean you're supposed to say, “OK, I take it back.”

Obviously, your next move is to get her to talk about her perspective. Out of this discussion, you might find yourself changing your perspective or you might realize you need to do a better job explaining your assessment.

Regardless of what comes out of the conversation, the point is, without Mentioning the Unmentionable, you never get to discuss the issue, so it does not get resolved.

With Mentioning the Unmentionable, you get to the heart of an issue and open the door to resolution and moving on. In the case of Steve, by Mentioning the Unmentionable, he gained valuable feedback from his employees about how he can be an even better manager.

THE OTHER COMMUNICATION PATTERN THAT OPENS THE DOOR TO CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Besides Mentioning the Unmentionable, the other language pattern I have found to be incredibly useful for fostering open dialogue is what I call: “*The Multiple Choice Approach Opener.*”

To illustrate this language pattern in action, let me use a critical moment of truth that has a huge impact on employee morale: the performance review.

Let's say you conduct a performance review with your employee Jenna, which included negative feedback. When you ended the session, you asked Jenna if she had any comments or questions. She told you she didn't. You searched her face for clues that indicated distress and saw none.

Days later, you notice that she has not been herself since the performance review. She seems withdrawn, not as enthusiastic or cheerful as she usually is. You wonder if that is the emotional fallout of the performance review.

To communicate your willingness to talk about this, you Mention the Unmentionable:

“Jenna, I may be imagining things, but it seems like you have not been yourself since we had our performance conversation. I want to check in with you, are you bummed about it or is something else going on?”

Now, notice how this explicitly communicates, “It is OK to

talk about the performance review if you are upset,” whereas a generic “Are you doing OK?” does not.

Let’s say that Jenna, getting the message from you that it is OK to acknowledge her feelings about the performance review, says, “Yes, I am upset about it.”

HOW NOT TO RESPOND, IF YOU WANT OPEN DIALOGUE

Now, imagine you respond like this: “Thank you for being open about this. I appreciate that. I can understand that it wasn’t terribly fun. Getting negative feedback is not pleasant. I hope, though, you found it useful.”

If you were Jenna, would you feel invited to discuss your point of view or would you feel like “case closed”?

By following up in this way, the boss communicates that this is the only “boss-approved” explanation. If there are other reasons why Jenna is upset, she probably will not feel comfortable bringing them up.

USING THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE APPROACH OPENER

Now, imagine if you responded this way: “Thanks Jenna for being open about this. I am wondering if you are upset because it is not fun for any of us to get negative feedback, or if it is because you disagree with my assessment, or because of the way the feedback was given, or something else?”

Now if you’re Jenna, what messages does this send to you?

1. Your boss cares about how you feel and how she affects you.

How does your boss communicate this? Both the fact that she asked how you’re doing and the fact that she came up with several possible reasons. She could not have come up with a number of possible explanations without having spent time reflecting on the situation.

2. Your boss is open to any and all issues you might have. By offering more than one reason or explanation for Jenna being upset, her manager communicates, “I am not wedded to any one interpretation or issue for discussion.” By offering a number of options, including the final “...or something else?” her manager communicates very explicitly that not only is it OK to talk about any of these issues, but any others that aren’t on the “choice list.”

SUMMARY

By making it comfortable for people to speak up and talk about what is troubling them, your managers can increase the odds their employees will talk openly about what’s on their mind. Such openness increases the odds difficult issues will be raised and resolved. It also increases the odds employees will be willing to share valuable insights and feedback with their managers, and management as a whole, feedback that will help create the kind of workplace that leads to high levels of employee engagement, productivity and morale. ■

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