



Being willing and open to have others challenge our ideas, opinions and decisions takes discipline and courage. Kelly Riggs explains why leaders often fail in implementing a 'tell me what you think' environment.

Tell Me What You Think (But Not Really)

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Leadership experts agree that an effective leader should be open to dissent, or differing, opinions. Jim Collins, for example, offers this observation in the essential best seller, Good to Great:

“Yes, leadership is about vision, but it is equally important to create a climate where truth is heard and brutal facts are confronted.”

In other words, a good leader is one who will create a workplace environment where employees feel free to disagree, to say what they think, or to push back on specific ideas or initiatives. Such a practice, if suggested, will help to create an environment of transparency, openness, and trust.

This sounds great, right up until the time the leader’s ideas or opinions are actually questioned.

As it turns out, there is a bit of difference between talking about disagreement and actually having someone question your decisions. Those in charge often tend to perceive dissent or disagreement as disrespectful. Argumentative. Inappropriate (“Perhaps you should get more than two years of experience before you start criticizing my decisions”).

More than a few times, I have seen leaders get irritated, even angry, when an employee challenges the boss’s ideas - even when they have been encouraged to do *exactly* that.

This doesn't mean that Collins is off base. It just means that the concept is a little more difficult than one might suppose. To successfully create an environment where the "brutal facts are confronted" requires much more than a simple edict by the boss ("Starting today, I want you guys to challenge my ideas!"). It requires a long-term investment in the manager-employee relationship. To feel comfortable enough to offer a conflicting idea, especially if the person you are contradicting is the boss, requires a strong, safe relationship.

"You Can't Handle the Truth"

~ A Few Good Men

Great movie.

Jack Nicholson's famous line has been used and re-used (and parodied) in every conceivable situation, but it *definitely* applies to the workplace. Managers, quite often, simply cannot handle the truth. There are, in fact, at least three sets of circumstances that completely derail Collins' idea of creating a climate where truth is heard:

- 1) A lack of maturity in the leader,
- 2) A lack of trust between the leader and his/her employees, and,
- 3) A failure to understand the motives of employees.

First, the leader who lacks maturity will react completely wrong to the employee who offers a contradictory opinion, and that will be the end of that. Want proof? Suggest to your employees that they need to challenge your thinking. Then, when they do, get irritated. Roll your eyes. Throw out a couple of sarcastic comments to show them who is boss. Argue your point - hard - without trying to understand their perspectives. It won't take more than once to shoot down the idea of "creating a climate where the truth is heard."

Second, it is an absolute certainty that no employee will challenge a leader whom they do not trust. A lack of trust is the invisible enemy of a high-performance workplace, and it is often created by the little things leaders overlook: A failure to follow-through. A lack of consistency. Poor decision-making. Selfishness. Inadequate communication. In the absence of trust, very few people will venture out on a limb to disagree with the boss.

Third, in the right environment, although employees may actually be willing to offer up contrary ideas, the boss still needs to understand the *context* of the disagreement. Sometimes, dissent is simply a resistance to needed change. Sometimes, dissent is a negative response to new responsibilities. Sometimes, dissent



only reflects a lack of understanding of the bigger picture. When employees push back against your ideas or current workplace practices, it makes a world of difference to know whether the employee is presenting a plausible alternative or simply lobbying to avoid something he or she doesn't care to do.

So, it takes a special kind of leader to encourage dissent. A leader who is competent, yet willing to learn. Confident, yet willing to listen. Strong-willed, yet open to new ideas. Which, by some coincidence, is exactly the kind of leader that employees love to work for. According to research psychologist Robert Hogan:

“Followers want four things: integrity, confidence, decision-making and clarity. But just as important is what followers don't want: irritability, moodiness, untrustworthiness, indecisiveness, needless micro-management and excessive authority. They perceive these things as incompetent, and pretty soon the leveling mechanism kicks in and there is a subtle rebellion.”

If you want to benefit from your employees' ideas and perspectives, start by creating the right environment. Get to know your people. Set clear expectations. Follow through. Spend more time asking questions than showing them what you know.

Something will begin to happen. Once employees perceive you as competent, fair, and willing to listen, you won't have to ask your people to offer up new ideas.

They just will. **RL**



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