



Facilitating upward communication

Oftentimes, what separates good leaders from bad ones lies in their art of communication. Much has been said about preferred leadership styles which advocate openness, tolerance and active engagement with subordinates.



But according to James Detert, Assistant Professor of Management at Cornell University, it's not enough to just possess good leadership traits.

“What my research is suggesting is that that's actually just the starting point. That these behaviours are a necessary but insufficient condition for upward communication from subordinates to their authority figures in most organisations for a set of reasons.

“One is that even when leader behaviour is pretty positive for open communication, often organisational systems or structures are not positive,” explains Detert, who spoke to INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of the first INSEAD-Wharton Research Conference on Leadership.

Hierarchy and accessibility (or lack of it)

Impediments to upward communication appear to centre on the hierarchical nature of organisations. “It's irrelevant what knowledge I have as an employee, what ideas, what observations or what problems I have, if I have no access to the people who are empowered to address (these issues).”

As hierarchy tends to breed formality, thereby sending subtle but very powerful cues about interacting openly with leaders, interaction is minimised – and the tendency for employees to be unquestioning and unchallenging is reinforced.

What's more disturbing is what Detert calls “implicit theories of voice,” which are the set of beliefs that employees come to work with everyday. Often, the impact of these beliefs is that people arrive at work, already convinced that it is pointless and unsafe to speak up to their bosses.

These employee beliefs effectively limit upward communication, somewhat irrespective of the employees' relationship with their bosses. Detert says it's because the belief system that we should act in deference to authority figures (or risk dire consequences) is so deeply entrenched that it can have very little to do with how current bosses have

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previously treated their subordinates.

Essentially, this puts the onus on the bosses because they are the ones who set the tone as to how their employees should behave, including when they make mistakes.

“I think the challenge that creates for leaders is immense because it says not only do you have to attend your obvious behavioural cues about how to be open and welcoming ... I think unless leaders actually explicitly surface those beliefs that people walk around with it, they are unlikely to be hearing the truth or the full truth on most occasions.”

Against the grain

That said, there are some bright spots. Detert says there are sub-units or sub-cultures in organisations where middle-level managers have been able to create a culture that goes against that grain, one that allows and encourages people to speak up.

Then, there are organisations he says, that are textbook hierarchies, but with interesting “release valves”. One example he gives is within the Japanese business culture, with its hierarchical, top-down approach. However, Japanese businessmen have an established practice of going to the bar after work, where employees can speak relatively freely to their boss.

Detert cautions, however, that creating structures to keep an organisation running like clockwork can also be its own Achilles Heel – at least where upward communication is concerned.

“We have this notion that we can fix routine day-to-day communication problems with structural solutions. I don't think that works. In fact I think going back to where I started, I think those structural solutions actually just remind people you work in a hierarchical setting, where it's normally not safe, so we've created a few safe places for you.

“I think if you really want people to feel safe and you want a culture where people feel safe, you make it every manager's job to be open and responsive to voice. And, you make managers aware of the reasons people may nonetheless be thinking it's not safe, and how they might work at surfacing and dispelling those stubborn implicit theories that lead to silence.”

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