

The Truth as a Tool for Organizational Effectiveness

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The inaugural issue of the *Journal of Association Leadership* was titled, “Time for Truth.” In the journal were several articles that put a call out to association executives to be more honest, to tell the truth, or to face reality. Their points are compelling, and no doubt organizations waste potential by avoiding the truth or seeing only what they want to see. But the response of simply being more honest or facing reality does not adequately address the complexity of the relationship between truth and organizational performance. If you want to harness truth to support effectiveness in organizations, you will have to change both the way you understand the truth and the way you use it in your organization.

A New View of the Truth

At the level of understanding, our biggest challenge is our insistence that there is one, single, objective, absolute truth out there. It is a biological fact that our brains can only understand and interpret reality through our own senses—from our vantage point, colored by our history, experience, and biases. If you want to increase performance in organizations or teams, then you more likely need to explore reality, not face it. In fact, you need to explore the many different realities that exist within the organization or team to determine how to do things differently to get better results.

Unfortunately, the myth of “truth as objective reality” prevents us from doing this effectively. By seeking to narrow down the *facts* in a situation, we close our eyes to people’s real experiences (creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of not facing reality). Exploring a variety of experiences of the truth, however, allows a team

or organization to discover not what is true, but what is important, and from that base they can move to more effective behavior.

A small association discovered this when exploring the uncomfortable issue of perceived bias by the CEO. Some on staff felt that a select few got preferential treatment from the CEO (listened to more often, trusted more, challenged less, etc.). They stewed about it at the water cooler for months, lowering morale and draining productivity. When they finally came together and discussed it openly at a facilitated retreat, they made some progress and began to identify new behaviors that would increase performance—all without ever determining the *truth* of the bias question.

Specifically, those that felt there was bias took the time to describe the events they witnessed that led them to their conclusion. In doing so, they noticed that very few actual events indicated bias—it was mostly in subtle interpretations of one or two actions (such as the CEO not saying good-bye to particular people at the end of one day), amplified via months of internal griping. The issue was also strengthened by the existence of other related organizational issues, such as long-standing conflict between departments.

The CEO, on the other hand, was able to describe his interpretation of the same events. In one particular case, his behavior toward one person (that she interpreted as exclusive, indicating a bias against her), was based on the fact that he had just hired this person and did not want others feeling that he was biased toward her. The staff saw that they frequently misinterpreted the CEO's intentions, and the CEO realized that his behaviors often had an impact that was different from what he had intended. Instead of debating about what the truth was in this situation, both sides simply elaborated on *their truth*, and they left with new strategies for interacting more effectively.

Putting the Truth to Work

Recognizing a more complex picture of the truth, however, is only half the battle—you also need specific analytical and communication skills to work through conflict and emerge on the other side with new, more effective behaviors. Unfortunately, these skills are often underemphasized in organizations. We have highly developed our abilities to analyze, to narrow

down, to rule out, and to pinpoint our answers, but we are often not as strong at discovery, exploration, or working in complex, chaotic environments. Putting the truth to work for organizational effectiveness requires leaders, managers, and staff to develop skills in both delivering and receiving truth, all in the context of exploration and discovery.

If delivering and receiving the truth sounds like it will be easy, consider the following opportunities you might have to try out your skill by

- telling your boss that he is micromanaging you;
- challenging a colleague on an idea you think will not work;
- bringing up a performance issue with a subordinate;
- explaining to a member that the deadline she is requesting is impossible; and
- figuring out why your team's project did not produce results.

To navigate sticky situations such as these, you will need to develop three critical skills related to the exploration of truth: giving feedback more clearly, listening more effectively, and asking more powerful questions.

Giving clearer feedback involves a shift in your stance away from providing conclusions and judgments and toward identifying specific behaviors and their impact. It allows for a two-way conversation where truth is explored with the goal of improving behavior or a relationship. Try giving your boss feedback that his specific behavior (checking in with you to see if you have completed a task three times a day) is having a negative impact on you (it takes up your time, it makes you wonder if he does not trust you, etc.). Recognize that his intentions may be quite different and use the feedback as the beginning of the conversation, not the end.

Listening more effectively also includes a more open stance and a focus on understanding the other before seeking to be understood. It also requires you to be more aware of your internal reactions to what other people are saying and to manage the emotions or judgments that may emerge. Listening effectively means being open to new information, even when it contradicts what you understand to be true. When discussing poor performance with a direct report and she is giving you her side of the story, stop listening to that voice inside your head (that is

often providing counter arguments or explanations as to why what she is saying is wrong) and focus your attention on her. Try to understand her experience of what happened. If she suggests part of the problem is your behavior as a manager, explore that option with her. Remember, the goal is to move to more effective behavior, not to blame people for past mistakes.

Asking more powerful questions requires an attempt to open up rather than narrow down. This means fewer “yes/no” questions and more open-ended ones. It also means refraining from typical cross-examination questions (“Isn’t it true that . . . ?”) and statements of opinion that are masked as questions (“Don’t you think it would be best to try . . . ?”). When working with your team to discover why a project did not produce expected results, do not start with a conclusion and then ask questions that will generate answers that prove you are right. Ask questions that get people talking more. “Why do you think that?” “What are some other possible explanations?” “Tell me more about that point.” At the end of the discussion you will bring some points to a more narrow conclusion (the ones that instruct you how to avoid this performance problem in the future), but by exploring all the possibilities first, your conclusions will be more effective.

So the truth offers a bit of a paradox for organizations that wish to use it as a tool for effectiveness. On one hand, the organization must be strongly committed to uncovering and clarifying the truth of everyone’s experience. This requires discipline, specific skills, and commitment to facing the truth and reality as it relates to effectiveness. On the other hand, people in the organization must let go of the expectation that they will discover a single, objective truth. Too strong an attachment to a single truth can corrupt that discipline and create a rigidity that weakens effectiveness. In short, there is a powerful difference between *truth* and *the truth*.

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