

Organizational Change: Four Key Steps to Create Transparency and Openness



In times of change it is vitally important for leaders to make it safe for people to be open and transparent about their knowledge, concerns, questions, and feedback for leaders.

In my consultations I regularly talk with clients who express concern about the lack of openness, candor, or participation in discussions within their teams, with colleagues, and in the larger organization. The focus is often on other people who are not forthcoming or participating actively.

Let's turn this around and focus on the leader: it is the leader's role to create an inviting and safe environment where people throughout the organization feel safe speaking up.

How can a leader build an environment of openness, candor, and safety?

The reality is that people often find it challenging to speak up in organization, and in times of change the challenge is heightened. This lack of openness is costly and potentially dangerous to the health of the organization and the well-being of employees, as it can result in confusion, issues not being surfaced quickly enough, compromised working relationships, and overall ineffectiveness.

I often hear leaders say, "Why didn't she come to me?" "Why didn't he speak up sooner?" "They don't trust. It's an issue of trust." What they mean is that these people are not trusting of the leader or the situation. But how might this lack of trust reflect on the person lamenting the lack of trust? Did something happen in the past to create mistrust? Or, what did not occur to build the necessary trust?

The leader's humanness sets the tone

People will respond to leaders based on their own perceptions and experience of that leader. To feel comfortable, people need to believe that the leader, first and foremost, respects and cares about them and the people in the room and the

organization. They want to engage with leaders who are neither judgmental nor critical, who can hear difficult things without blaming others, and who want to address issues constructively.

It is important for leaders to be aware of their own reactions to what they are hearing. Leaders would like to believe they are open and approachable and not part of the problem. It is hard for them to see this aspect of themselves.

To become more aware, consider your level of openness:

1. How nonjudgmental and non-blaming are you?
2. How do you react in moments of stress?
3. Are you perceived as helpful in thinking through issues without taking over?
4. Do you know how others feel about your openness and level of respect, caring, and judgment?
5. How available and accessible do you make yourself to candidly discuss what matters to them?
6. How do you respond to conflict and disagreements? Do you shy away from them? If you shy away, do people think you can't be approached about conflict
7. Or, do you approach disagreements and conflict in ways that people end up feeling overwhelmed?

Discuss what matters to the participants

Regularly engage colleagues and employees in meaningful discussions. Ask them directly what is on their minds and why. Raise issues and concerns and ideas calmly; speak directly to the issues. Design discussions to encourage people to think together, wrestle with issues, listen to each other, bring forward varied points of view, and develop insights.

Ask questions to stimulate people's thinking. Ask what is important to be talking about, what their concerns and challenges are. Listen carefully to understand what people are saying. Let them know what you hear and what you understand it to mean; this will tell them that you either do or don't understand, and that you are actively working with them in the discussion.

PowerPoint presentations and prepared comments get in the way of honest discussion. Be as unscripted as possible to allow for spontaneous thinking and for bringing forward what is on the minds of participants and getting their active engagement with the ideas.

As the leader, what is your ratio of asking questions to making statements? Are your statements sometimes interpreted as pronouncements? What is the impact on the discussion; does it deepen, or does it stop or fizzle out? How much space and opportunity are you making for people to be in conversation with each other and bring forward their views?

Small group discussions are preferable

For one-on-one discussions, plan a time and place where you can talk in as relaxed a fashion as possible. For group discussions, six to eight people is ideal. People feel more comfortable speaking up in small groups and will contribute more readily. They can build on what has been expressed by adding their own perspectives; in this way, conversations take shape and ideas are brought forward and discussed or incorporated.

In large groups individuals might comment, but it can be difficult for them to connect the comments in ways that move issues forward. It is also more challenging for people to express differing views and talk about areas of conflict.

Encourage expression of conflict and disparate views

Let conflicting views surface; draw them out. Ask people for their thoughts and perspectives. Let participants know you genuinely want to hear all the different perspectives and the thinking behind them. Ask where the problems and issues are and why participants think they exist.

It's up to the leader to create an inviting and safe environment

Successful change in organizations requires an environment of openness, transparency, and ease in order to bring forward necessary ideas, perspectives, and conflict. To speak openly and candidly, people need to feel supported, know they will not be judged negatively, and know there will be no reprisals. Genuine connection, interest, and honesty on the part of the leader will encourage and support people to speak up.

Take a few minutes of quiet thinking

1. How would you describe the levels of openness and transparency throughout your organization? What is occurring or not occurring to result in this? Why?
2. How do your own emotional reactions express themselves and what is the impact on people and the discussions and the work?
3. When you are engaging with colleagues and employees, how aware are you of your emotions, of how they express themselves, and their impact on others?

In a related blog post, *Organizational Change: Creative Conflict*, I address the leader's role in actively working to bring forward differing views and conflict.

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