4 WAYS TO CREATE A CANDID CULTURE

When people don’t feel safe speaking up, leaders can show that it is safe by saying the hard things themselves.

2 PRIME THE PUMP

Phil began meeting regularly with groups of opinion leaders from throughout the organisation—encouraging them to bring their toughest questions. One topic that never came up was criticism of a major re-organisation Phil imposed two years previously. So he primed the pump.

In one of these sessions he said, “How are you feeling about the integrated project/teamm structure we started two years ago? I’m sure there are frustrations with this one. What barriers are you facing? What isn’t working?”

When people don’t feel safe speaking up, leaders can show that it is safe by saying the hard things themselves. By saying the unsayable, and doing so with a tone of voice that suggested respect for this view, Phil created a little more safety.

And the dam burst. For the next 90 minutes, the group poured out their views on the inadequacies of the new structure. Phil acknowledged their concerns and invited them to discuss modifications to the model.

Most importantly, this influential group began spreading the word that Phil was sincere about being open to criticism.

3 LEAD BY TEACHING

Phil went beyond encouraging openness to teaching it. He and his senior team taught four-hour sessions on how to have what his colleagues and he called “crucial conversations”—how to diffuse strong emotions, how to speak candidly without provoking resistance, how to quickly build rapport, and so on. As people acquired these new skills, their confidence in speaking up increased.

The fact that Phil personally taught the skills showed how invested he was in having open conversations.

4 SACRIFICE EGO

On one memorable occasion, Phil said in front of a group of middle managers: “I’ve been told I am unapproachable. I don’t know what that means. I would appreciate any specific feedback any of you would be willing to offer me.”

The rest of the group looked on in awe as one brave soul, a manager named Terry, raised his hand. “I would be happy to,” Phil said in front of a group of middle managers.

Terry met later with Phil and gave a couple of suggestions—which Phil then publicly acknowledged. Phil sacrificed his ego to show how much he valued candour and openness and that people were safe with him.

PARTING THOUGHTS

For two years, my colleagues and I measured the frequency of people raising risky issues with peers, subordinates, as well as with senior managers at this defence company.

Within the first few months of Phil’s campaign, these measures shot up by double digits, and continued to increase during the rest of this period.

For example, employees were 15% more likely to report that they were comfortable sharing bad news up the chain of command—a remarkable change from the past.

Listening matters. But sometimes you’ve got to open your mouth too and make positive statements to generate the safety people need.