

Common Sense Pills

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

An MBA student in one of my classes reacted to my lecture on how forecasts are almost always wrong by saying that you can have the most rigorous software to forecast peak loads and schedule people, but you need to temper the computer decisions with common sense. What a wonderful statement, and I could not agree more.

Having been in the corporate world for several decades and running my own business helping companies for the past 15 years, I have seen or made my share of boneheaded decisions and policies. It would be helpful if each organization had a kind of medicine cabinet, and inside there was a bottle of sugar pills marked “**Common Sense Pills.**”

Workers could be allowed access to the cabinet so any time a manager proposed a new policy or decision that was counter to what the organization was really trying to accomplish, the workers could get the bottle of pills and put it on the desk of the executive. Of course, in most cultures, that act of honesty would be followed by all kinds of retribution against the employee. You would also see a secret camera installed over the medicine cabinet so in the future there would be evidence in order to punish the correct person.

I picked up a neat phrase at a Vistage lecture several years ago (cannot remember who the speaker was). He said, “...doing things this way is only common sense: too bad it is not common practice in most organizations.” We really need a mechanism for making sure common sense solutions are also common practice. There is such a remedy if only leaders would invoke it.

The antidote to blundering into decisions that defy common sense is to build an environment of trust. If people know they will not be punished for voicing a concern, and if leaders have the foresight to consider and discuss the impact of possible decisions before blurting out stupid orders, then many of the errant decisions would be avoided, and the “Common Sense Pills” would grow old in the medicine cabinet.

What if you were a leader and wanted to increase trust so people would tell you when you were about to do something stupid? The answer is to reinforce people when they tell you something you really did not want to hear. I call this leadership behavior “reinforcing candor,” and I believe it is the quickest route to building real trust in any organization. Once you start making people feel glad when they point out a potential gaff, they will do more of it, which allows more protection in the future.

The ability to reinforce candor also reduces the risk of ethical problems in the organization. Ethical dilemmas often start with innocent and legal decisions that become accepted behavior. Then, if we can shade the numbers this way today, we can add a little more coloring tomorrow, and soon we are on the slippery slope that leads to obvious illegal or bone-headed activities.

Leaders often miss the slide of behavior into questionable areas as if they are wearing dark glasses. If you are a leader who makes people feel glad when they point out a potential problem, you will get the message soon enough that you are about to cross the ethical line. That can not only keep you out of trouble; it might even keep you out of jail!

Another way to reduce common sense errors is to have a well documented process. The organization's procedures need to be well designed and include a review or audit process with benchmarks and check points that will expose problems. With that level of rigor, a proposed deviation from the procedures would stick out like a sore thumb.

It also helps if there are specific measures in place that everybody knows. If we get off the beam, the measures, if they are well constructed, will give us leading indicators of trouble to come. If you are an employee and see something wrong, you can use these measures or audits to approach leaders in an objective and non-threatening way.

Most leaders punish people who challenge an action, and that behavior lowers trust. That is when employees need to start reaching for the Common Sense Pills again. Instead, foster an open environment where your employees are allies who help you run an excellent organization.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763**

