

Reinforce Candor or Speak Truth to Power?

By Robert T. Whipple MBA CPLP

My Leadership model for building trust has a central element entitled “Reinforce Candor.” This is the ability to make people glad they expressed a concern with a leader’s inconsistency. Usually, people are punished for expressing a concern with the leader’s actions. When high trust and transparency are present, the leader can set aside his or her ego and reinforce the person who challenges an action. Doing so creates a large trust deposit and allows for future trust-building exchanges. When candor is not reinforced, people hide their true feelings and do not challenge the leader, so trust is hard to maintain. Leaders who consistently reinforce candor build a culture where trust grows and deepens.

I was doing a presentation recently and a bright student cornered me on a break and asked why my phrase of reinforcing candor was not just the same thing as speaking truth to power. The question was not easy to answer with everyone buzzing around and the need to take a bathroom break myself, but the question played on my mind.

Later, I went back over the thought process and my notes for how I ended up with the wording of "Reinforce Candor" as the best phrase. I had forgotten how much time and effort I had spent trying to get exactly the right combination of words. The reason I thought "Speak truth to power" was too narrow was that the phrase implies that it is a one way trust building thing. In fact, I believe great leaders try to get everyone in the organization to reinforce candor, so it means not just speaking truth to power but being free to speak truth to everyone without punishment. The boss needs to feel reinforced for being candid with the employee as well as the other way around. We don't often think about the reverse effect because we have such huge problems getting leaders to understand and do the direct effect.

The second aspect I found lacking in "Speak truth to power" is that it leaves out the magic ingredient, which is *reinforcement*. Lots of leaders will allow people to speak their truth, but not many have the ability to make people glad when they say something in opposition to what the leader thinks is right. That is why it takes a lot of work and energy to get leaders to understand this magic ingredient - it goes against human nature until the leader becomes convinced of the wisdom in it. Once a leader experiences the incredible trust building impact of reinforcing candor, he or she is inclined to do it more often because the small price to pay for suppressing one’s ego is completely overshadowed as the organization becomes a more real place where people are not playing games with each other.

While my model is focused on the behaviors of leaders (because it is a leadership model and leaders are where the problem resides 99% of the time) the model really needs to be spread to the whole population once a leader fully understands its power.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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