

The StraightTalk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Fostering Integrity: Seven Steps to a StraightTalk Culture

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It is easy to blame an organization's ethical lapses on rogue individuals, the CEO or the Board. But in our experience, many failures of integrity reflect a more fundamental flaw: organizations' difficulty in surfacing and appropriately addressing important issues. Without a culture of doing so, people hide bad news, accept questionable business practices, play games with budgets and allow individual agendas to set the course.

At one extreme, the unwillingness to raise and respond to potentially challenging issues allows scandals like Enron and Worldcom to grow unimpeded. But equally troublesome, it also bypasses smaller ethical lapses – such as backroom lobbying with a peer to get one's needs met or bullying a subordinate to accomplish a task – that can erode a company's ability to grow, innovate and create sustained value.

Improving integrity lies in creating a culture in which issues are readily surfaced, discussed and addressed. A culture in which openness to ideas, whether mainstream or contrarian, is encouraged instead of resented. In short, enhancing integrity lies in establishing a StraightTalk culture that is consistently applied with all stakeholders: employees, customers, investors and others.

StraightTalk and Integrity

StraightTalk is direct, open, respectful dialogue about significant issues. Without exception, every client with whom we have worked recognizes the value of StraightTalk. Yet each also rated his or her organization as less proficient at StraightTalk than at any other attribute of value-creation – lower than external orientation, continuous learning or teamwork orientation.

Many leaders believe they practice StraightTalk by “telling it like it is.”

StraightTalk fosters integrity by requiring individuals to raise issues of concern. It demands that they offer their perspectives in an environment where everyone listens and is heard. As a result, StraightTalk builds a culture in which matters related to how each individual and the organization conducts its affairs – with subordinates, peers and supervisors; customers and suppliers; the community, competitors and others – are openly raised,

considered and managed.

How can leaders establish and operationalize a StraightTalk culture? Try implementing the following foundational principles.

1. Dialogue, Not Monologue

Many leaders believe they practice StraightTalk by “telling it like it is.” Regardless of how reasonable or compelling such monologues may be, monologues do not encourage people to come forward and express their views on challenges and opportunities, or raise questions about ethical practices.

In contrast, StraightTalk is telling and hearing it like it is. The more leaders at all levels engage in dialogue, the more empowered people feel to volunteer concerns and suggest ideas for addressing them, and the more others will weigh in to help develop effective strategies.

2. Listen Actively

Successful StraightTalk requires ensuring that information and opinions are both surfaced and heard. Too often, individuals repeatedly articulate their ideas without clarifying that others understand them and/or are speaking the same language. Doing both through active listening is essential before closing a topic and agreeing on implementation steps.

Active listening can be as easy as translating someone's point back to them ("If I understand correctly, you are saying _____.") or encouraging them to build on your idea.

3. From Critic to Champion

StraightTalk improves attitudes, behaviors and decisions to help people achieve better results through more effective collaboration. That is why a StraightTalk culture demands that leaders transform from critics to champions, and also recognize and act on the difference between rights and responsibilities.

Simply put, critics find flaws; champions focus on improvement. For example, although your position or expertise may give you the "right" to criticize an idea as stupid, doing so may be irresponsible. It is also a serious breach of StraightTalk, because such criticism quickly squashes dialogue.

In a StraightTalk culture, your responsibility is to actively and positively participate in an iterative process that creates the best possible outcome – in other words, to be a champion. When presented with an idea with which you disagree (and which may indeed be flawed), you articulate the basis of your disagreement and suggest an alternative for further discussion.

4. Speak Up – Respectfully

StraightTalk requires that leaders put their issues, information and opinions on the table. Remaining silent because everyone else has expressed an opinion similar – or contrary – to yours is unacceptable. In a StraightTalk culture, weighing in on important issues is the vehicle through which you participate in recognizing and responding to issues, and improving decisions.

How you drive that vehicle is crucial. The behavioral equivalent of running red lights or cutting drivers off communicates that you respect neither individuals nor their ideas, which shuts down StraightTalk dialogue as effectively as flipping a switch. Sharing opinions

honestly but respectfully is critical to a successful StraightTalk culture.

5. Encourage Participation

Organizations pursuing StraightTalk can easily fall into the trap of mistaking a few frequent voices for a StraightTalk culture. As a leader, you need to actively encourage others to join the discussion, even going so far as to personally ask them to participate. Some individuals may initially resist, but usually join when it becomes clear that you and the team value their input.

**"There is no such thing as a
minor lapse of integrity."**

~ Tom Peters

Above all, your behavior is the most powerful tool for creating a StraightTalk culture. Explain to your organization what StraightTalk is, how it works and why it is so important. Then go and "live" StraightTalk. When your behavior is not up to StraightTalk standards, admit it, apologize and try again. Others throughout the organization will model your behavior, each spreading StraightTalk through their own groups and teams.

6. Foster Diversity, Reward Disagreement

Diversity is especially important in our fast-paced global climate, which presents issues that are much too complex for homogeneous thinking. Indeed, today's best decisions represent the broadest range of perspectives offered in an atmosphere that combines constructive disagreement with building on ideas to forge better solutions.

Rewarding conflict is one of the best ways to surface diverse opinions and encourage healthy arguments about them. Simply thanking someone for presenting a dissenting view can be very effective, as

is a personal call from the CEO to thank an individual who raises ethical concerns.

7. Clarify Authorities and Accountabilities

StraightTalk can be extremely valuable in reducing and even ending turf wars. Try using it to clarify individuals' ranges of authority and responsibility for expected results, identify required relationships and resources, and foster discussions about how people can cooperate to accomplish tasks that fall into both of their areas.

The key to resolving cross-functional issues is keeping the problem-solving focused on advancing the organization's strategic priorities. In a StraightTalk culture, addressing these and other thorny issues such as budgeting is usually very different from other organizations. Instead of the typical "get-as-much-as-I-can" approach, open, frank discussions of what each group needs to achieve its objectives often results in managers relinquishing budget to areas that are both more needy and more likely to have a strategic impact.

StraightTalk has the greatest effect on an organization's ethics when people use it to improve outcomes. The more seriously people take their obligation to speak up, and the more they recognize that their contributions will be treated with respect, the more energy they invest in forthright, respectful collaboration in pursuit of better results.

The integrity of every organization that lacks the culture and/or process to surface and address significant issues is at risk. Not all of these will face disaster as a result, yet even the small breaches that are commonplace in non-StraightTalk cultures can have a significant negative influence over time. StraightTalk offers more than enhanced integrity. As it fosters win-win decisions, StraightTalk also reinforces the teamwork required to create lasting value and long-term success. [HK](#)

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