

# Leadership and candour



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Government leaders who leave a legacy in their communities are those who find a way to bridge their personal and political differences. This is easier said than done in an environment where the economy is in recession, and budget cuts feel like they're coming from muscle and bone rather than fat. Yet, citizens are less concerned with how their leaders stand on a particular issue and more concerned that those leaders are engaging in civil discourse to reach sound decisions – especially when those decisions involve reductions in service that violate long held expectations.

## **Listening to the worst of what others have to say**

Unfortunately, our current political climate has provided too many examples of discord and stalemate, which are reinforcing the public perception of government inaction, as well as demoralising government leaders and staff at all levels. Civil discourse resulting in sound decision-making requires more than good intentions. It requires skill in conflict resolution and collaborative dialogue. Strong communication within our local authorities and excellent service

to the public are two sides of the same coin – a strong council culture produces employees with a greater commitment and capacity for serving citizens.

Unfortunately, excellent communication, even in the best of times, is counter-intuitive. Our gut instincts too often lead us down the wrong path. This is especially true when we are forced to listen to unhappy people communicating their abject disappointment, criticism, and anger in us, and the service we provide. No one enjoys criticism. Even if it's called 'constructive feedback' our minds get busy mounting an internal counter offensive that we just can't wait to unleash. Still, our ability to listen to the worst of what others have to say is the key to instilling confidence in our staff and our public.

As long-time researchers in the field of communication and conflict resolution, we acknowledge that dysfunctional responses to criticism are natural and instinctive. We default to a defensive mode because our bodies and minds perceive criticism as a threat to be defended against. Physiologically, we react to criticism the same way our ancestors reacted to a sabre-toothed tiger. Our

flight-or-flight response takes over. And when that happens, we too often say things that we regret later.

Because in a complex, interactive civilisation, going with one's primal instincts is not always – or indeed often – a winning strategy. Paradoxically, the consequences of battling or deflecting criticism are far worse than experiencing the initial discomfort and learning to cope with it and, indeed, to embrace it.

Cheryl Miller, Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council put it this way:

“It doesn't matter how obstinate, irrational, or prejudiced another person's opinion. Until you accept that, to them, it's a good and rational reason, you will never understand the 'why' – and will never resolve the problem. I have no difficulty admitting my personal vulnerability – admitting what I don't know and can't do. This is what opens up other people to acknowledge their own vulnerability and fallibility”.

### **Rejecting criticism can result in disaster**

Conversely, pushing away critical information can have disastrous consequences. Consider how the systemic suppression of criticism contributed to the Challenger disaster on 28 January 1986 when the space shuttle broke apart 73 seconds into its flight, leading to the deaths of its seven crew members. According to investigations carried out in the aftermath of the incident, a tendency for the now notorious 'O' rings to malfunction at low temperatures had been noted by engineers well before the explosion. Many credit the tragic decision to the circumstances surrounding the launch – notably the intense media

attention attracted by the teacher-in-space programme, pressure from Washington DC and the repeated delays that had already occurred. But a 13-member US presidential commission blamed the disaster on NASA's faulty decision-making. Why did such a decision have to be made under pressure if the potential for failure was already known? The reason lies in a culture with the habit of ignoring negative news. After all, went this particular rationale, if you listened to engineers, who always want more data and consistently err on the side of caution, you'd never get anything done.

The end result of defending against criticism – without listening to it – is often a stalemate or worse. Breakthroughs occur only when criticism is truly heard and the positive potential of conflict is fully appreciated. Instead of dreading criticism and conflict, we must recognise them for what they are – opportunities for generating creative solutions to important problems, for gaining new perspectives, and for enhancing personal and professional relationships.

But listening to people is only half the equation. We must also have the capacity to deliver difficult messages. Why do so many of us fear raising sensitive subjects? The answer seems to revolve around trust, and what we imagine creates trust between people. Most of us equate trust in relationships with lack of discord.

### **Delivering bad news can build trust**

This is not to suggest that getting along is an undesirable goal. We all enjoy having an air of overall ease in our relationships. But heartfelt trust – the firm belief that someone will act honourably,

responsibly, and fairly – can only develop as a result of a deeper dialogue. The more we're able to tell people what's on our minds, and to do so in a non-threatening manner, the more they'll be inclined to respond openly. This dynamic lays a bedrock foundation that will hold firm even on those days when things may not be very pleasant on the surface, and when we don't necessarily see eye to eye.

Often when the moment comes to air a delicate issue, we wonder: is there enough trust in this relationship that the person will hear my concerns without becoming defensive or angry? If we fear that answer is no, that our bond isn't strong enough, we'll lose our nerve and back away. But here is the paradox: courageous communication requires forging ahead anyhow, secure in the knowledge that trust is not a prerequisite for communication; trust is a by-product of communication.

### **We must face our demons to thrive on conflict**

It only takes one person to transform a dialogue. As one person changes, the other moves to accommodate the change. So, in order to thrive on conflict, we must be able to raise sensitive issues in such a way that people will readily engage with us in a conversation and work toward a shared solution. Since we already know how likely most people are to assume a defensive position – physically, mentally, and

emotionally – when they face criticism, it stands to reason that our persuasive powers will be greater if we bring up whatever the matter is in a way that minimizes the listener's resistance.

It's never easy to confront delicate issues in these troublesome times, either with citizens or people working within our own organisations. But avoidance is worse. Side-stepping is undeclared wars that can ravage enterprises and personal relationships. Persuasive communicators must face our demons and choose directness that is carefully considered.

These courageous efforts will be rewarded with creative solutions, increased understanding from restless citizens, and systems and work teams that function at the highest levels.

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