



big
ideas

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Little white lies

It starts with phoning in sick and ends in corporate chaos

Admit it: you have a rhinoceros under your table. You have a serious issue that no one in your organization is willing to deal with and you know intuitively that eventually it will raise its huge head and wreak havoc. The ugly monster is dishonesty, and it lies at the root of most organizational conflict.

Most people consider themselves relatively honest, but when placed in an organization where honesty is not highly regarded, they will find it difficult to stick to their values. If they don't play along with the group, others may accuse them of being naive and even ignorant.

A culture of dishonesty starts with the seemingly innocent white lies that we're all familiar with. A recent U.S. survey of 305 employees found that 62 per cent of workers who called in sick weren't sick at all. One very costly lie is the one we tell when someone is fired. Maybe you have seen an email like this: "Memo to all staff from the CEO: Jim Andrews will no longer be working at ABC Company as of October 31, 2006. We wish Jim well in his future endeavours." Such an email can cost an organization thousands of dollars in lost productivity. One person may go home sick; another may spend the rest of the day preparing a resumé. It only takes one person to create a groundswell of gossip that will keep half the employees talking up a storm.

It's not that the lie is so bad on its own; it's the mammoth sense of mistrust that builds in its wake. If the mistrust is not dealt with, it will slowly sink a business. Tiny lies can create ripples of gossip and tension. These in turn cause a deeper, lurking sense of mistrust that slowly drains the energy out of people and corporations. And without trust, workplaces become fragmented institutions where individuals are only interested in protecting themselves and their jobs. This lack of trust destroys co-operation, negates the possibility of teamwork and ultimately interferes with the effective operation of any organization.

So how do you build trust? Simply start by telling the truth. When a boss offends you, tell her so. When an associate arrives late, tell him about how it impacts you. Easier said than done, you say?

The main reason we do not tell the truth is because we are afraid of repercussions. If we are sure there will be no negative

consequences, the odds of us telling the truth will go up. So to tell the truth we must create a situation where there are few penalties, where it is safe to be honest.

There are two ways to do this: in private with one other person and in a team. If you want to tell the truth to one person you must first assume that this person can handle the truth and would benefit from hearing it. If you had a piece of broccoli stuck between your teeth you would want to know about it. Most people will understand why you or your company may need to make certain decisions, even if they may not agree, particularly if the decision is communicated in a kind way. Adopt a positive intent. You must want this person to be their best. Find a quiet time and

confidential place. Finally, simply tell this person what you observed without judging that person and how their actions impacted you. Most people will not take offence to what you saw or to how you felt.

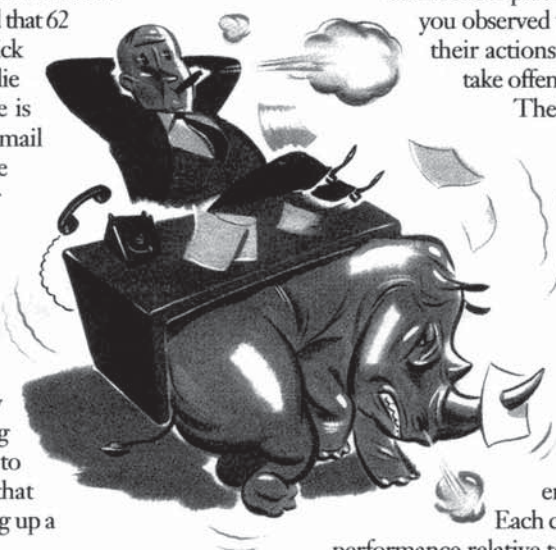
There is no blaming and thus the door is opened to further conversation.

To tell the truth in a team can be even easier. In his new book *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink tells a powerful story about how the New York Police Department was able to reduce crime significantly because of one man's idea to introduce a technique he coined "fish-bowl management." Now, every two weeks, the NYPD sits in an open circle with all 76 precinct commanders, along with chiefs and deputy chiefs.

Each commander is questioned on his or her performance relative to corporate strategy in front of peers and supervisors. As described by Pink, "As a result, an intense performance culture was created in weeks – forget about months, let alone years."

Try this: at your next meeting remove the table and set your chairs up in a circle. Over time this simple technique will not only encourage candour, but will change the way you communicate, the way you treat each other and the way you conduct business. You will slowly build trust and candour.

Here is the bottom line: when people are told the truth they start trusting. When people start trusting they stop lying. When they stop lying, the corporation saves money and people are happier and more effective. ■



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