

## The Truth as a Leadership Imperative

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Are the staff at your association telling you the truth? Or are important things being left unsaid, glossed over, or avoided? If you suspect the latter, you have work to do. Read on for some direct and practical advice on how to build a culture based on truth.

In the film *A Few Good Men*, Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson take on the roles of courtroom adversaries. At the height of their battle, the lawyer played by Cruise demands “the truth” from Nicholson’s character, to which he vehemently responds, “You can’t handle the truth!”

Yet as powerful as that moment was on screen, it grossly oversimplified the situation being investigated in the story. The characters were discussing a matter that involved alleged murder, international relations, centuries-old military tradition, and dozens if not hundreds of individuals interacting in many different ways and contexts. In a situation brimming with nuance, the film, in true Hollywood fashion, boiled everything down to a righteous (and simplistic) demand for the truth.

Truth, honesty, and integrity are important, but they are not nearly as simple as portrayed in the movies. We may collectively value truth, but throughout our history we have oversimplified our commitment to it. The result has been a growing weakness in our understanding of truth and how it plays out in our lives—our individual lives, our political lives, and, most importantly for this article, our organizational lives.

Organizations are more effective when truth is spoken more regularly. I am bound to get nearly universal agreement with that statement, and there is plenty of evidence to back it up. Unfortunately, the ways in which we oversimplify what we mean by “truth” actually end up reducing how much truth gets spoken.

### Three False Frames

First, we tend to frame the truth as simply “not lying.” That sets the bar way too low. Consider a typical staff or board meeting. We do not aim to deceive, but we do carefully choose what information to present or what statements to make. In the moment, we decide that presenting half-truths is going to be easier or at least more efficient than opening up a can of worms with the whole truth. It's too much to tackle the deep dysfunction in that department, for example, so we'll just briefly cover the workarounds that we've put in place.

This strategy rarely serves us. When we encounter tough problems, we can typically trace them back to opportunities we missed to deal with the issue earlier on—opportunities we missed because we settled for half-truths.

The antidote is a focus on learning. When figuring out what to say, how much information to share, or what questions to ask in a conversation, think about what will generate the most learning. If you are truly committed to learning, you'll share a lot more than the half-truths I typically hear spoken in organizations. The result, in most cases, will be better problem solving.

We also tend to frame truth as purely objective facts. That is a piece of what truth is, but such a frame narrows down our conversations to focus endlessly on getting the facts straight. That is important, but it is rarely enough when faced with tough organizational problems. You will never figure out the dysfunction in that department by narrowing down to one or two facts; you need to include the subjective and complex understanding of the various people involved. Building the capacity to have both convergent

(fact-finding) and divergent (open-ended) conversations is critical if you want to handle the whole truth in your organization.

The third way we oversimplify truth is by relegating it to the realm of individual integrity. Personal integrity certainly matters, but the level and quality of truth we get from people in organizations is far more dependent on organizational culture than we'd like to admit. In a battle between a culture and an individual, the culture always wins, so if you want to have more truth available to the people in your organization, focus on building a culture of truth.

### **Building a Culture of Truth**

As soon as we start talking about building a culture where truth is spoken more freely, however, too many of us will write this conversation off as something to deal with "someday." Organizational culture is amorphous and hard to get our arms around, and with budgets tightening and workload increasing, the idea of a culture-change initiative is going to take the backseat.

Of course, this leaves us in a Catch-22: Our current system of half-truths and incomplete conversations actually makes us less nimble and less efficient—two qualities we need today more than ever.

We need to break this pattern. We need to find ways to start changing our cultures today, even if we can't afford a series of facilitated offsites or a fancy set of inspirational posters. We need a simple framework to help each of us—no matter where we are on the organizational chart—to immediately start changing the culture in ways that promote more truth and better problem solving.

Here is my first stab at it. If you want a culture of truth in your organization, start by addressing the following three things: walk, talk, and systems.

#### **Walk**

"Walk" is simply about individual behavior, as in "walking the walk." More truth requires everyone in the organization to consciously choose new behavior in situations where truth used to take a back seat.

If you're on top of the organizational chart, you can't order people to do this. You have to work with them to create new patterns of behavior. You have to model it.

If you're toward the bottom of the chart, you can't wait for permission to do this. You have to make a decision about how much truth you think will help you get your job done. I would just ask that you give it a try.

Believe it or not, the easiest context for testing out this new skill (truth is a skill, by the way) is when you have a disagreement. For example:

- At a senior management team meeting, the marketing VP presents the direction for the new website, and you feel it has some major flaws.
- In your project team meeting, the meeting planner is leaving a number of details unfinished and says they can be worked out onsite, but you disagree.
- Your boss schedules a team meeting for Thursday at 8 a.m., but he knows that you have already paid for an exercise class that prevents you from getting to the office before 8:45 on Thursdays.
- The committee chair emails you to say she is disappointed in your lack of responsiveness from the email she sent "several days ago," when in fact it was sent late Friday afternoon and it is now first thing Tuesday morning.

In most organizations, the typical response would be this: Don't say anything right away, particularly if other people are there. Deal with it later and do it gently, because you don't want to cause problems. If you want a culture of truth, however, you'll have to take a different approach. How about this:

Confront the person directly, but focus your conversation on what's being done and what the impact is on you or others. Repeat back to the marketing VP the specific elements of the design that he described, and connect those elements to possible negative effects on membership, user experience, or whatever your concern may be. It's not that the marketing VP did a bad job—it's that you have concerns about the specifics of this plan and its potential impact.

Focusing on observable behavior or action steps and the impact they will have tends to shift the conversation away from judgment (this design is wrong or bad, this won't work, you should have done better) and toward productive problem solving. Perhaps more importantly, you showed everyone in that meeting that you can disagree out loud and still have a productive conversation. You showed that complicated, even somewhat contentious, truth is valued and works.

The same is true for the other examples above. Everyone in your organization can practice giving people more direct feedback that is focused on behavior and impact (as opposed to judgment), and it goes a long way in supporting a more open and truthful culture.

### **Talk**

While the “walk” category looks at behavior and interactions among people and groups, making changes to the “talk” part of the framework focuses on statements we make. You would be surprised at how important this can be to changing a culture.

Art Kleiner wrote a brilliant book, *Who Really Matters*, in which he argues that every organization has a “core group” (not necessarily located at the top of the organizational chart), and organizations tend to move in the direction that everyone thinks the core group wants to go. Note that the direction is the one people think the core group wants—even if that perception is inaccurate.

This is where truth becomes very important. When you are the executive director and you come back from a board meeting, what do you report to your staff? How much detail do you provide about the conversation? Imagine if the board discussed cutting a program that could, theoretically, imply layoffs. Would you come back and tell your staff about it, that you don't know what will happen, and that it has serious resource implications? Many would choose to say very little, not wanting to worry the staff. But here's the rub: They are probably already worried. In the absence of your statements, your people will have no other choice but to invent the truth themselves. Ninety-nine times out of 100, the stories they make up will be worse than the actual truth. If you leave them guessing, they might conclude that layoffs are imminent and start asking around about new positions. You could very well end up losing staff regardless of the board's decision.

There's no simple answer in that situation, but at the least you should challenge your own assumptions about it. Pay closer attention to what you share with your staff, with other departments, with volunteers, or even your friend in the cube next door. We have a tendency to withhold information because it gives us the illusion of control. We convince ourselves that if we wait and carefully craft a message or package the right information later, we'll get better results.

That is sometimes true, but decreasingly so. We're all running at an increased pace these days, so the benefit we get from carefully crafted messages later is overshadowed by the cost of not sharing imperfect information today. The rest of the people in our organization need what we're not sharing.

On top of that, sharing information builds trust and strengthens relationships, two qualities that are critical for operating in today's faster pace. We don't have to share everything; that would slow us down and be confusing for everyone. But we can be strategic in sharing more than we're sharing now.

When given the opportunity to share information (like the board meeting summary), consider important questions like

- How will it help build trust?
- How will it help strengthen a relationship?
- How will it enable other people in the organization to get things done?
- How will it counteract fear?
- How will it encourage others to be more open?

Wherever your role, you can find ways to strategically expand the information you are sharing and the truth you are speaking.

### **Systems**

I started with “talk” and “walk” to emphasize the point that culture change is accessible to everyone in the organization. Each one of us is faced with different choices when it comes to elevating the level of truth in our organizations, but we all have opportunities to take concrete steps in that direction. The time may not be right for everything, but it's always right for something.

Organizations are systems, however, so we must complement these individual efforts with some attention to our structures and processes. One without the other is insufficient in the long run.

Perhaps the easiest place to start is with staff or team meetings. Most people hate them anyway, so why not start experimenting there? If you designed these meetings with a culture of truth in mind, you might end up with a very different structure.

Instead of having everyone report for 10 minutes each about things they have been doing, you could set up electronic forums for sharing basic dashboard information among all team members, reserving face-to-face meetings for deeper conversations focused on learning. Prioritize topics based on learning value and the opportunity to engage in more divergent conversation. Assuming you've been developing your people's skill in truth telling, the results would make the time spent worthwhile.

The same approach can be applied to board meetings as well. We are all becoming familiar with the time-saving technique of a consent agenda (grouping noncontroversial items together in one item that is voted on without discussion), but what if we specifically identified agenda items where we knew there would be disagreement and put them first on the agenda? Association consultant Jeff De Cagna has long advocated for the creation of such a “dissent agenda.”

By building constructive conflict into our meetings, we can actually take some of the drama out of conflict—it's simply a normal part of our board deliberations. It becomes normal for board members to express disagreements, clarify why they are advocating their position, and challenge each other's assumptions. Simple process changes like these can go a long way to building a more truth-friendly culture.

### **Paying the Price for Truth**

Building a culture of truth is not easy, but no one said leadership was easy. You will encounter resistance, and you will add some tension to existing relationships. There is no avoiding this. It is part and parcel to dealing with truth. Gloria Steinem has been quoted as saying, “The truth shall set you free. But first, it will piss you off.”

Everyone has a role to play in building a culture of truth, so we all must decide whether we are willing to pay the price. Are we willing to work through disagreements and tension? Are we willing to face our own inner contradictions or call out our colleagues? Are we willing to stay in hard places long enough to reach that point of clarity or insight that produces a new level of results?

I hope we are, because paying this price yields significant returns. Current research points to dangerously low levels of engagement among employees, resulting in lower efficiency and higher turnover. A culture of truth can counteract that. A culture that supports expression and learning does not typically produce disengaged employees. People who know they can speak the truth are not the ones who call in sick on Fridays.

So pick an area to start working on, and make some changes tomorrow. Practice giving better feedback and engaging in constructive conflict. Pay attention to what you say and don't say and how that impacts other people in your organization. Choose to counteract the stories your people will invent by strategically inserting more information. Experiment with new processes and structures and measure the difference. Don't fall into the trap of oversimplifying the truth. Embrace the complexity, one step at a time.

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