

Creating a “Speaking Up” Culture

The Need:

Organizations depend on the knowledge, ideas and observations of their employees for current and future performance. Yet there is evidence that employees too often choose silence over speaking up, leaving managers to face the difficult repercussions of a culture in which staff don't speak up:

- When problems arise, learning that staff knew about the issue all along, but no one raised it with you
- Dealing with very complex issues that could benefit from, and need, the input of everyone - but getting little help from subordinates
- Observing that subordinates often comply rather than take the initiative, hold private conversations rather than bring issues out in the open, and blame managers above them rather than accepting responsibility.



Those same managers find themselves in a similar bind in relation to their own bosses:

- Wanting to fairly represent the issues and concerns of subordinates up the chain of command while recognizing that the boss doesn't want to hear them “again.”
- Knowing that the plan the boss wants to implement won't work with your subordinates but also having concerns about being seen as “not a team player.”
- Being expected to “bring your folks in line,” but seriously doubting your power to impact their behavior much.

Studies of work situations show that the reluctance to speak up is not a function of a person's personality, work style, or professional discipline. It is also not a function of organizational level -- the concern about speaking up is as prevalent in senior managers as it is in front line workers. Rather, the reluctance to speak up is related to the specific conditions the potential speaker faces. The willingness of individuals to share ideas in their organization is a function of three factors:

- Perceptions, specifically concerns:
 - With what others will think of them – peers, boss,
 - About being seen as not a team player,
 - About being publicly embarrassed by a boss (being told they are raising a issue that has already been settled, the issue is unimportant, or it's the wrong issue or solution)
- A sense of isolation:
 - When people do not feel connected to or familiar with each other to each other, they are more likely not to share
 - The more connected, the less restrained subordinates are.
- The lack of processes or forums:
 - Individuals need an environment conducive to the expression of ideas
 - Certain conversational formats are conducive to testing out ideas, identifying similar problems and gaining a sense of support.

In this program we tackle both ends of this serious impasse. We teach subordinates how to speak up for the good of the organization by addressing their own skills, concerns and isolation. We teach leaders how to design and convene conversations that create the psychological safety, powerful focus, and openness that allows subordinates to tackle even the most difficult and delicate issues.

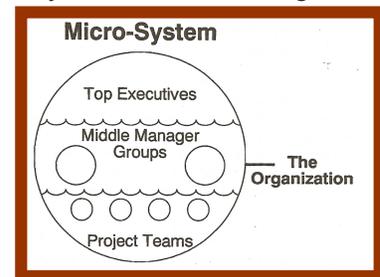
Objectives:

This program focuses on three overarching sets of objectives, which may be taught in stand-alone workshops or as part of a coherent learning experience.

Power and Systems:

Not all organization problems are skill or personality based; many are systems issues that are present in every hierarchical system. In this workshop we teach participants to see the 'unseen forces' of the structures within which they work. In this workshop day they learn to:

- Recognize system dynamics for what they are - systemic conditions that happen with great regularity regardless of the people involved.
- Strategize how to engage other levels - recognize the dynamic so you can think through how to gain their cooperation. Develop a shared understanding of, and perspectives about, the systems dynamics regularly experienced at the top, in the middle, and at the bottom within each participant's own organization in order to see their organization more clearly. This awareness opens up new and more powerful possibilities for creating a culture in which all speak the truth in partnership up, down, and across organizational lines.
- Outline concrete steps participants can take as individuals and as a group to further strengthen communication, partnerships, and performance.



Participants leave the workshop feeling less powerless and less blaming of other parts of the organization. They gain a realistic view of their own power.

Speaking Up:

In order to understand how to engage people below you to speak up, you have to be able to speak up yourself. In this workshop day, participants learn to:



- Understand and recognize the factors which regularly dampen speaking up --
 - Systems dynamics and organizational design (policies, structures, etc.)
 - Leadership styles and practices
 - Potential risks and consequences
- Explore one's own strengths and weaknesses when speaking up
- Expand your repertoire of tools and skills to make it more likely that you will speak up with confidence and positive impact in risky situations

- Develop questioning skills that:
 - encourage others to speak up
 - deepen your own understanding of other's perspectives
 - ensure you gain more accurate feedback on your own ideas
- Identify an important organizational issue and develop an action plan for speaking up about a critical organizational issue.

Leader as Conversation Architect:

The goal of this workshop day is to help leaders and managers develop a culture in which subordinates willingly and openly offer their ideas, concerns, and challenges – and as willing accept responsibility for moving their unit forward- where they are willing and able to tell truth to power. At the end of this workshop day, each participant will have learned to:

- Design processes, for his/her own unit, that will elicit performance improvement ideas, subordinate concerns, and challenges to current assumptions



- Apply the concept of psychological safety to their own unit
- Identify leader behaviors that tend to shut down conversation through language or action
- Construct and deliver responses to ideas and challenges in a way that encourages continued idea generation.
- Learn where your leverage is –
- How to bring a group together to get results e.g. generate new ideas, take responsibility for implementation

Audience:

This program may be adapted to middle managers up through C-suite executive. Because we ask participants to look at their own issues, actions and language, the workshop is most effective with participants who choose to attend and who are willing to reflect together.

Our Approach/Methodology:

Design drivers for each session include:

- This workshop engages attendees in thinking in new ways, while being relevant to what they value and understand.
- Experiential simulations allow attendees to test and validate concepts in an engaging, refreshing and sophisticated manner.
- All activities either augment and highlight a particular learning point or reflect the environment at their organization. The goal is for participants to explicitly address how to create an environment for speaking up within the context of their organization's challenges and opportunities.
- Discussions after each activity or lecturette provide focus for the group's learning, linking course material to real situations at their own organization and addressing specific issues of concern.

Nancy Dixon
Common Knowledge Associates
nancydixon@commonknowlege.org

