

the elephant in the room

ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

Imagine that you walk into the boardroom for a meeting with your senior staff. In the middle of the room sits a large, angry looking elephant. Surprisingly, no one at the table seems to notice this elephant. Not sure yourself, you ask, "Does anyone notice anything unusual today?" Everyone agrees that everything is fine, just as usual. You continue the meeting until the elephant stomps his feet. Still, no one says anything about it. The meeting concludes. You stop at the water fountain and catch the whispered conversation between two executives. "Do you think he noticed the elephant?" one says to the other. "No, we all told him everything was fine and he believed it. If we tell him about the elephant, he may decide that we are losing control of the business and that wouldn't bode well for us or the organization." They return to their offices, dismissing the elephant's presence in the room.

Such is life at many organizations. Despite signs that there are problems, no one is willing to "name the elephant in the room," especially to the CEO. Many CEOs and senior level executives, aware of their very public presence and the need to appear in control, powerful and right, are threatened by negative feedback, especially from subordinates. The more attached they are to a course of action, the less open they will be to receiving feedback that may require a change of course. In turn, the subordinates may be fearful of the repercussions of telling an unwelcome truth or pointing out an area of vulnerability. Typically, agreement and consensus are seen as positive while dissent is seen as negative. Being a "team-player" takes precedent. Stakeholders may interpret consensus as an indicator of corporate well-being and indeed, this may be reflected in stock prices and other snapshots of organizational health. Any manager or employee who is interested in rising up the ranks will not single him/herself out as a dissenting voice.

Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, a professor of management and Frances J. Milliken, a professor of management and coordinator of the doctoral program in Management and Organizations, both at NYU Stern, call this phenomenon "organizational silence." They point to this silence as a major impediment to organizational learning and change "by

blocking negative feedback or information that suggests that current practices are not working as intended." Learning and innovation take place in environments that are curious, open to creativity and diverse ideas, and that promote open dialogue. In order for these elements to be present, there must be tolerance for vulnerability and failure combined with a compelling vision of what is possible and communication venues that include all levels of feedback. Otherwise, errors will persist and there will be no new development of more effective human resources, systems and processes. Companies will become extinct depending on past knowledge and processes whose effectiveness diminish with time and technological and global leaps.

Human beings want to feel included and that they have a sense of control over their lives and work. Expressing their views and being a part of the decision-making process allows an employee to feel heard, valued and seen as a valued contributor. On the contrary, feeling that "the messenger will be shot" will sustain a climate of silence and eventually apathy. Indeed, it may be only at a staff level that problems are most apparent and solutions most available. Without the input from line employees and up, senior management may not even be aware of a problem before it becomes a crisis.



Required Reading for Growing Companies

Reprinted Content from
Volume 5 Number 10 October 2005

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In their *Academy of Management Review* article, the authors of the study on "organizational silence" point to two major factors that contribute to organizational silence:

1. Top managers fear or are threatened by receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. Indications are that they often "ignore the message, dismiss it as inaccurate or attack the credibility of the source." This fear of, or resistance to, "bad news" only serves to maintain an atmosphere of silence where upward communication of information is stifled.

2. The authors believe that at the root of organizational silence is a set of unstated beliefs that managers may hold about employees and about the nature of management:

a. One such belief is that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy and not as invested in the success of the organization as upper management. Behaving as if this assumption is true will eventually lead to its realization.

b. A related belief is that top management, not those below, always knows best

about issues of organizational importance.

c. A third erroneous belief that tends to be held by managers in organizations characterized by silence is that unity, agreement and consensus are signs of organizational health, while disagreement and dissent should be avoided.

Organizations most conducive to an environment of silence tend to be dominated by individuals with economic or financial backgrounds and whose top management holds similar training and experience and is distanced from the employees. The more cohesive and similar top management is, the less dissent is tolerated and the more likely the individuals share mutual assumptions.

In order to move from a climate of silence, management must seek out and accept feedback regularly, create safe channels for upward communication and create a learning organization based on trust. Employees must feel safe and valued for their contributions. This requires that top management follow through and reward feedback and alternative perspectives. The shift from a climate of organizational silence to a climate of open dialogue is a quantum shift, one where past hurts, cynicism and entrenched assumptions will be difficult to overcome. Only by naming the underlying factors can an organization evolve, in time, from closed and fearful, to open and empowered.

CEOs must regularly make critical decisions in the face of rapid changes. The quality of the information he/she receives from all levels will contribute to that decision-making process. Without channels for feedback, the CEO is acting with only a portion (maybe not the right portion) of the available data.

Eventually, someone may name “the elephant in the room.” If not, that elephant may well transform into a Mammoth. And we all know what happened to the Mammoth...