

WHO DARE SPEAK TRUTH_{TO} POWER?

How organizations can encourage influential partnerships

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“NOBODY SPEAKS TRUTH TO POWER. NO ONE TELLS YOU YOU’RE A FOOL OR THAT’S A STUPID IDEA.”

Leaders - from presidents and CEOs to principals and primary school head teachers - exert power over people’s lives. Significant aspects of their personality - such as self-confidence, charm, being visionary or simply a strong communicator - are often the ingredients that elevated them to their influential positions. Yet almost every forceful character in a managerial or leadership position will have downsides to their personality. A go-getting, optimistic leader is likely to be arrogant at times and may be overbearing or even too forceful. Similarly, a wildly imaginative and innovative type will probably display a sprinkling of eccentricity and possibly a hint of vagueness from time to time.

As leaders scale the career ladder and acquire more power and influence, the impact of these overplayed strengths becomes more far-reaching. At the same time, their behaviors are likely to gain momentum, turning more excessive and unfettered because of a lack of counterbalancing forces. Colleagues and peers have less influence, and this constrains their ability to challenge the leader through honest discussion, debate, criticism, or advice. “Nobody speaks truth to power,” says Geoff Trickey, Managing Director at Psychological Consultancy Ltd. “No one tells you you’re a fool or that’s a stupid idea. You’re beginning to feel indestructible so at that point the dark side is just lurking around the corner. It’s been creeping up on you as you’ve moved up the building.”

STEMMING THE TIDE

So how widespread is the issue? Research suggests that as much as 85% of the UK population has at least one potentially derailing personality characteristic, with over a quarter possessing four or more. These dark side qualities typically become apparent during novel or stressful periods, or when an individual feels relaxed, or invulnerable. Given the prevalence of these characteristics, the question then is what can organizations do to curb excessive behavior amongst their leaders and minimize the risk of them derailing?

There are numerous tools and interventions available to help leaders today, providing important insights into the impact of their behavior. Assessing extreme personality characteristics, for example, helps individuals to increase awareness of their blind-spots and potentially counterproductive behaviors. It can

provide early-warning signals, flagging areas they should pay attention to and, in the process, start preparing them for feedback on these behaviors. Further feedback is also available through 360 degree surveys, which provide leaders with rich insights into colleagues' opinions of them and highlight ways in which they could improve in their attitudes, behavior, and performance. Casting the net more widely, employee engagement surveys show how enchanted or otherwise employees are about the organization, its culture, and processes.

THESE TOOLS HAVE BEEN DEMONSTRATED TO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT. BUT IS IT POSSIBLE TO GO A STEP FURTHER, CREATING A ROLE FOR SOMEONE TO PROVIDE REGULAR FEEDBACK AND ENSURE THAT INFORMATION GLEANED FROM THESE ASSESSMENTS AND SURVEYS CREATES A CHANGE IN A LEADER'S EVERYDAY BEHAVIOR?

INFLUENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

One solution is to help leaders to create sustainable influential partnerships. History and literature are peppered with examples of the court jester or fool, who dared to 'speak truth to power'. Today, a more common example of an influential partnership is likely to be a 'trusted aide'. This person could be a spouse or partner, a work colleague, or a 'tough-talking' executive coach. Crucially, it needs to be someone who is not in competition or engaged in a power struggle with the leader and who can speak up without fear of recrimination.

TO BE SUCCESSFUL, AN INFLUENTIAL PARTNERSHIP MUST POSSESS CERTAIN KEY QUALITIES. FOR EXAMPLE, THE PARTNER MUST HAVE THE COMPLETE TRUST OF THE LEADER AND HAVE THE LEADER'S BEST INTERESTS AT HEART. THEY MUSTN'T COMPETE FOR POWER, AND THEY SHOULD BE WELL-VERSED IN THE ISSUES AND SENSITIVITIES SURROUNDING THE LEADER.

Perhaps most importantly, though, is the need for them to be given free rein to speak the truth. Having knowledge of the leaders' dark side tendencies, they must be able to flag up when the counterproductive behaviors are in evidence and be candid with their feedback, even if it is not what the leader wants to hear.

Organizations require diverse personalities and leaders often need counterbalancing forces to moderate and mediate their behaviors. By raising awareness of dark side tendencies and creating influential partnerships, organizations can help leaders to curb their more extreme counterproductive behaviors and avoid the potential pitfalls to derailment. Ultimately, these relationships could benefit the leader, their employees, and the health of the organization.