It's quiet, too quiet: The danger of silence at work

IESE Prof. Mireia Las Heras reviews common communication failures and outlines an action plan for turning conflict into an opportunity for improvement.

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When all is quiet and conflict-free in an organization, it is often taken as a good sign. Don't be fooled: Silence could be a red flag.

A roaring sea may signal an approaching storm. But if the sea is calm, does that mean no trouble is brewing? Not necessarily. Recall the 2004 tsunami that took so many people by surprise as they lounged on the beach the day after Christmas.

A similar thing can happen in organizations: Everything seems fine one minute, and then conflicts surge up with a vengeance.

In her paper, IESE Prof. Mireia Las Heras explores the organizational dynamics that can give rise to sudden, unexpected conflicts. She suggests strategies to adopt in order to turn conflict, whether latent or blatant, into an opportunity for improvement.

"Better not say anything"

In an era when self-empowerment, coaching and open communication receive so much attention in business circles, it is surprising that employees are still reluctant to speak up to their managers.

Employees who clam up rather than open up about potential problems usually do so because they feel the costs outweigh the benefits. They fear they will be labeled as troublemakers or suffer some form of retaliation.

Whether their fears are justified or not, certain managerial behavior and attitudes can send strong signals that silence is the preferred option, such as:

- Thinking that employees are only motivated by personal interests.
- Believing that soliciting employee feedback is an unnecessary risk.
- Assuming that it is enough to talk to the employee's direct supervisor.
- Imagining that downward communication from official employee committees or unions is enough.
- Taking the lack of complaints as a sign of unity and identification with the company mission.
- Behaving as if everything is running as smooth as silk.

Certain organizational characteristics can also act as barriers to upward communication. For example, in technical fields, engineers or financial managers may take a more mechanistic view of how the organization works.

Other organizational barriers include: numerous levels of hierarchy; significant cultural, ethnic or gender differences between top managers and employees; or when the strategy revolves around cost control.

The cost of silence

When employees opt for silence rather than offer suggestions in areas where they could contribute their knowledge, the organization suffers significant opportunity costs in terms of lost creativity and innovation.

Vital information is wasted, since those working at the coalface are more familiar with the day-to-day problems. Those who are silenced are less likely to identify with the goals of the organization. They will not feel like fellow builders of a shared project.

This lack of motivation can lead to stress, absenteeism, resignation and even strikes or sabotage. If senior managers interpret such behavior as mere opportunism or disinterest, this will only serve to reinforce the original assumptions that led to the silence in the first place, creating a vicious circle.

Breaking the code of silence

Breaking the code of silence requires changing the organizational climate and structure, in order to facilitate two-way communication and the free flow of ideas.

- *Downward Communication*. When it comes to senior managers communicating with staff, there needs to be a mix of personal as well as formal communication channels. An active and dynamic intranet can be a good, structured way of keeping people informed of relevant topics, but managers also need to be seen as approachable and sensitive to employee concerns and needs. Being a visible presence and having a genuine open-door policy can help.
- *Real Diversity*. Senior managers need to reflect diversity in terms of culture, gender and training. This can be achieved through multidisciplinary work groups and eliminating any barriers to recruitment.
- *Aligned Objectives*. The objectives of employees and senior managers should coincide. Also, those responsible for achieving an objective should be recognized and rewarded, perhaps financially.
- *Quality Improvement Teams*. Quality circles made up of volunteers and team leaders can meet regularly to identify, analyze and solve work-related problems together, and then present their solutions to improve the performance of the organization.

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