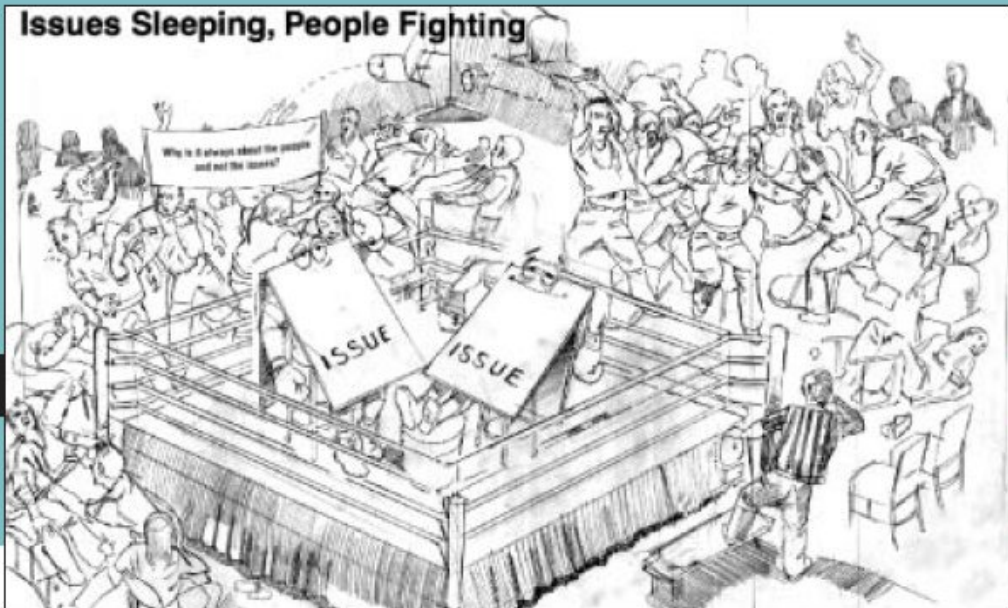


Issues Sleeping, People Fighting



FROM BATHROOM TO BOARDROOM

Surprisingly, in most organizations real truth is often spoken only in three places: in the hallways, at the watercooler and in the bathroom. These are the places where people feel that it's safe to say what they really think. But some innovative organizations are finding a unique way to get the critical issues out of the hallways and bathrooms and onto the boardroom table to discuss, debate and decide publicly. This powerful way to shift hidden conversations into public dialogue is founded on authenticity, truth-telling and relevance. This is, in the end, what drives real employee engagement, business clarity, personal and professional alignment and ownership for the creation and execution of sound business strategies. Execution requires realism, and realism is based on truth.

When private conversations become public dialogues, the mirror of "realism" can become a powerful agent for change. But if change is so simple, why are organizations having such a hard time openly discussing critical issues? A partial answer is that most organizations have a hard time separating issues from individuals. As a result, there is a real tendency to either avoid confrontational issues altogether or, even more often, to be soft on issues and hard on people. When an organization is soft on issues and hard on people, politics reign supreme, issues go unaddressed, and real conversations flee to the safety of hallways, bathrooms, and watercoolers.

The sketch below is a great example of this. In the boxing ring, we see the critical issues taking a nap on each

other's shoulders while people in the stands are fighting each other over personal points of view rather than debating the critical business issues.

This sketch was used with an actual \$17-billion company that had developed a culture where no one could separate critical issues from people's opinions. As a result, they never engaged in real dialogue on issues, and they engendered a political culture where any challenge to an opinion was perceived as a personal affront as opposed to a rigorous debate on a business issue.

When this organization used this sketch as a mirror, the leaders began to challenge and change their own behaviors, as well as how they interacted as a team. This dialogue led to a second sketch that differentiated the issues in

the ring from the people in the stands, who took sides with the issues, not personalities, and openly debated the issues to a clear, aligned decision.

The realism of this behavior and its entrenchment in the entire organization created a real pull for the sketches. They were used at many meetings where members dropped issues in the ring as a visual reminder of a new behavioral practice, and where they separated issues from individuals and battled the issues to clarity.

WHY IT WORKS

To put people and teams at all levels at ease, organizations have found that humorous sketches and cartoons can make people comfortable in talking about issues that are in the way of successful execution – exactly the ones that they don't know how to talk about. Most teams and individuals still want to avoid conflict or tension. They can't imagine how a meeting spent drawing pictures of reality and talking about them can be more than a complaint session. Surprisingly, the informal cartoon sessions are giving teams more permission and a method to talk about the barriers to taking performance to the next level.

These "sketches of reality" engage employees at all levels of any size company in addressing the sacred cows and elephants in the room. Used effectively,

they can become secret weapons to confront conflict in a positive way. Here's why this approach works:

1. People get to what is real. By "picturing" the organization as it is, we can understand its current state and place insight and clarity around strategic gaps.

2. Visual engagement confronts denial. People can't look at this kind of picture and not do something about it. The process creates a call to action.

3. Informality is vital to candor. The humor of these sketches externalizes the issue so the issue itself can become the focal point, not the people surrounding it.

4. Sketches guide conversations that are critical to change. "On point" humor keeps discussions and debate moving toward the desired goals.

When these discussions are moved to places such as the cafeteria, the conference room, or the boardroom, two things happen: People speak openly in a way that is conducive to organizational change; and change can be reinforced with relevant, pointed humor, so the goals aren't forgotten. A clear understanding of the present combined with visualized goals for the future creates a formidable catalyst for change.

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