

So if trust leads to successful engagement with authenticity, truth telling, and realism, leaders must define reality and have the courage to accept it at face value. There are three beliefs that keep people from telling and accepting the truth at work:

- People believe that their managers and leaders really don't want to hear the truth.
- People don't think that they can safely tell the truth.
- People don't know how to discuss the "undiscussable" issues and still be viewed as a positive force in the organization.

All of these beliefs are responsible for the lack of realism and truth in our day-to-day interactions. They force people to say what they think others want to hear rather than what they believe to be true. As a result, we don't become real in our expectations, in our thinking, and in our interactions. Much of this typical "engagement" ends up being nothing more than a charade.

"Water Cooler" Sketches – a Better Way

One of the most longed-for aspects of truth telling is just the simple acknowledgment and awareness of what is really going on. After all, the first responsibility of great leaders is to define and confront reality. But most companies and teams don't know how to have truthful conversations.

Critical conversations should happen in the open, but in many organizations, they occur in just three places — at the water cooler, in the restrooms, and in the hallways. Those are the locations where people feel free to say what they really think, and where they can share their views and speak the truth.

As we've worked with various companies, we've created some techniques to move these hidden conversations into public dialogue. One technique is called "water cooler sketching." After leaders tell us about the

challenges they face (behavior, cultural, and strategic), an artist draws a black-and-white characterization of these problems or barriers. Using compelling visual caricatures, cartoonlike quote bubbles, and humor, these sketches get to the heart of the matter in a way that mere words can't. The light tone ensures that no one takes the organizational self-critique too seriously.

These water cooler sketches create a candid mirror of reality. They are an informal way to address conflict, ambiguities

in the strategy, and destructive behaviors, and offer opportunities for individuals and teams to be more effective. They invite people to openly talk about the tough issues. The sketches "draw out" opinions, attitudes, and beliefs so that they can be honestly addressed and so that new solutions can be crafted. People simply can't look at the picture and decide not to do anything about it.

Most critical conversations occur at the water cooler.

Truth at "The Dinner Table"

A leadership team's willingness to align and embrace new behaviors has a tremendous impact on the speed of execution. Here's an example: A large industrial conglomerate was trying to initiate a meaningful engagement in the execution of a new strategy to become more of a networked enterprise. Their profits had declined significantly and top-line growth had stalled.

Faced with the knowledge that his leaders' behaviors were anything but aligned, the CEO arranged a senior team meeting. He used a sketch of their behaviors as a starting point for dealing with the realities that were holding back the potential of the company and its people. The sketch that depicted their reality showed leaders sitting around a "decision dinner table" wearing masks

and not saying what they really thought. If they needed to talk about something important, they slid a note into a box behind the CEO's chair reading, "Can we talk in private?" Some business unit leaders didn't appear to be as valued as others, and never made it beyond a figurative kids' table.

Several people clearly played by the old rules, represented by a shield that stated, "I met my number – you can't touch me." The issues to be discussed were on the table, but under a cover that was kept tightly closed. Given that the essence of the new strategy was to become more networked, the behavior that stood out the most was suggested by phrases on the backs of two chairs, where half the group felt they'd be better off together and the other half felt they would be better off apart.

The leaders' first reactions to the visual were, "What an exaggeration!" and "That's not fair!" Then, one brave person said, "You know, these are the behaviors that will prevent us from being successful." It soon became clear that the picture was very real and relevant to what the team needed to address in aligning their behaviors to lead this strategic change.

One leader said, "We've heard this before, but when we see it like this, we simply can't ignore the fact that we have to do something about it."

Unanimously, the group identified ways to align their behaviors with the transformation strategy of the business and took steps to hold themselves accountable for these new behaviors.

Changing the Image of Reality

It's important to remember that sketching the truth is valuable only if it deepens accountability, challenges the status quo, and enables new energy and enthusiasm for finding a better way. Water cooler sketches give people on any team the opportunity to put the truth on the table in a safe way. People can see how they've contributed to the truth on the table, what they need to do to change that behavior, and how the future sketch of the company's reality should look.

In *Dilbert* cartoons, the cynicism and frustration imply that someone else needs to do something about the current reality. But leaders can help people to realize that they are all accountable for creating and sustaining the environment that needs to change. The key is to start a conversation that, in the end, is about how reality must change — and that change starts with the leaders of the organization.



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