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Our University - Truth Telling

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Our University - Truth Telling

One of the greatest challenges for leadership is to get people, in all parts of the organization, to tell the truth about how things are. It is not that they actively lie, but that they never want to be bearers of bad news. Short-sightedness drives the teller to say what he or she thinks will make the hearer happy, at any level of the organizations hierarchy.

This is not a new idea. In the Greek tragedy *Antigone*, penned 500 years before Christ by Sophocles, the concept is introduced with this simple phrase, "*No one loves the messenger who brings bad news.*"

And it rages on today, from Wall Street to Main Street, in banks, in government, and for us, on campuses from the classroom to the board room.

In political organizations wholesale changes of "appointed staff" are part of the patronage culture of American politics, for better or worse. In public universities, where distinctive relationships between leaders, faculty, and staff, are driven by the noble and powerful idea of shared governance, an even more pronounced scarcity of truth exists for the complexities of making sure that, in revealing the perceived truth about a situation, one is not scapegoated.

And without the truth forward-progress is nearly impossible.

Of course, only the numb, small-minded believe lies are better than truth, but they are enough to cause people interested in forward-progress to have legitimate concerns.

Reasons to be unwilling to tell the truth about the effectiveness of the organization abound. Copiers and coffee pots, when not kettles for gossip, are magnets for truth telling but you cannot lead armed with a coffee pot.

Leadership that reacts negatively to the truth, or wants to blame someone for unsatisfactory answers to questions, gets exactly what it demands...pandering lies and mealy-mouthedness. When leadership shoots messengers, active, outright lying proliferates rather than the equally destructive but seemingly less obtrusive, soft-soaping of reality. It is a matter of survival.

Leadership without trust is like pie without crust: nothing holds the goods.

I worked for a fellow who, when somebody wanted to know what he thought about a particular issue, people always answered, "Ask the last person he talked to." Leadership that demands yes men and women is not leadership at all, but a form of self-amusement.

Telling the truth about an organization, to quote The Lovin' Spoonful is "... not often easy and not often kind..."

If the organization prospers, long-term job security is enhanced.

In my own experiences, getting people to tell the truth is tough. There are so many reasons not to. So many opportunities to lie your way through a difficult situation so you don't have to be the culprit who shines light on a broken aspect of the organization.

Nothing will kill progress and make for more meaningless talk - talk that some leaders call leadership - than working to please someone in a leadership position by telling the person what you think he or she wants to hear.

Soon the organization will start to vibrate with meaningless chatter, and nuts and bolts will begin to fall off, vibrations of all types will begin to shake the enterprise and then the whole thing will fall apart.

At our university, at every level, we should be truth-telling about things for two reasons: First, it moves the university forward. Second, it is almost a sacred demand of the leadership position of a university, where students are watching role models behave.

And, the truth will set you free.