Good Communication That Blocks Learning

by Chris Argyris

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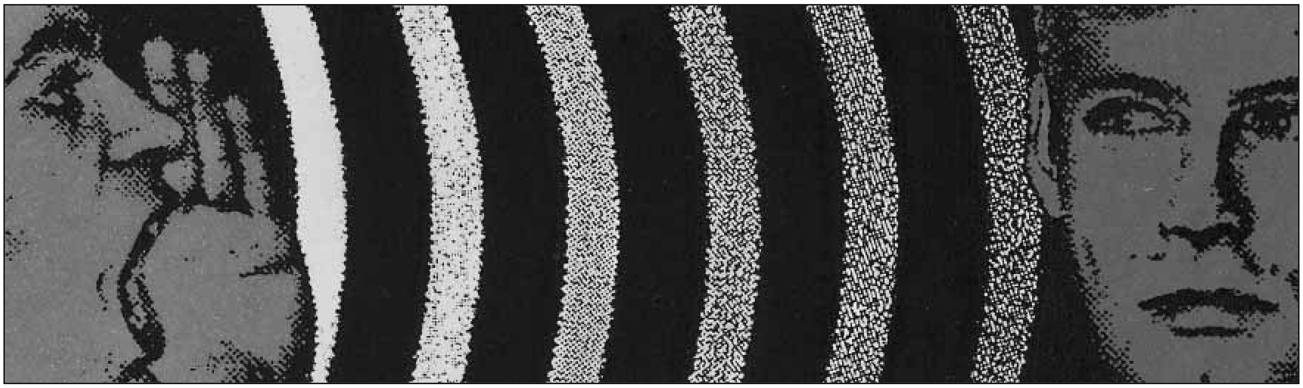

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by Chris Argyris

Twenty-first-century corporations will find it hard to survive, let alone flourish, unless they get better work from their employees. This does not necessarily mean harder work or more work. What it does necessarily mean is employees who've learned to take active responsibility for their own behavior, develop and share first-rate information about their jobs, and make good use of genuine empowerment to shape lasting solutions to fundamental problems.

This is not news. Most executives understand that tougher competition will require more effective learning, broader empowerment, and greater commitment from everyone in the company. Moreover, they understand that the key to better performance is better communication. For 20 years or more, business leaders have used a score of communication tools–focus groups, organizational surveys, management-by-walking-around, and others–to convey and to gather the information needed to bring about change.

What *is* news is that these familiar techniques, used correctly, will actually inhibit the learning and communication that twenty-first-century corporations will require not just of managers but of every employee. For years, I have watched corporate leaders talking to subordinates at every level in order to find out what actually goes on in their companies and then help it go on more effectively. What I have observed is that the methods these executives use to tackle relatively simple problems actually prevent them from getting the kind of deep information, insightful behavior, and productive change they need to cope with the much more complex problem of organizational renewal.

Years ago, when corporations still wanted employees who did only what they were told, employee surveys and walk-around management were appropriate and effective tools. They can still produce useful information about routine issues like cafeteria service and parking privileges, and they can still generate valuable quantitative data in support of programs like total quality management. What they do *not* do is get people to reflect on their work and behavior. They do not encourage individual accountability. And they do not surface the kinds of

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DRAWINGS BY DAVID HORII

deep and potentially threatening or embarrassing information that can motivate learning and produce real change.

Let me give an example of what I mean. Not long ago, I worked with a company conducting a TQM initiative. TQM has been highly successful at cutting unnecessary costs, so successful that many companies have raised it to the status of a management philosophy. In this particular case, a TQM consultant worked with top management to carry out a variety of surveys and group meetings to help 40 supervisors identify nine areas in which they could tighten procedures and reduce costs. The resulting initiative met its goals one month early and saved more money than management had anticipated. The CEO was so elated that he treated the entire team to a champagne dinner to celebrate what was clearly a victory for everyone involved.

I had regular conversations with the supervisors throughout the implementation, and I was struck by two often-repeated comments. First, the supervisors told me several times how easy it had been to identify the nine target areas since they knew in advance where the worst inefficiencies might be found. Second, they complained again and again that fixing the nine areas was long overdue, that it was high time management took action. As one supervisor put it, "Thank God for TQM!"

I asked several supervisors how long they had known about the nine problem areas, and their responses ranged from three to five years. I then asked them why, if they'd known about the problems, they'd never taken action themselves. "Why 'Thank God for TQM'?" I said. "Why not 'Thank God for the supervisors'?"

None of the supervisors hesitated to answer these questions. They cited the blindness and

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timidity of management. They blamed interdepartmental competitiveness verging on warfare. They said the culture of the company made it unacceptable to get others into trouble for the sake of correcting problems. In every explanation, the responsibility for fixing the nine problem areas belonged to someone else. The supervisors were loyal, honest managers. The blame lay elsewhere.

What was really going on in this company? To begin with, we can identify two different problems. Cost reduction is one. The other is a group of employees who stand passively by and watch inefficiencies develop and persevere. TQM produces the simple learning necessary to effect a solution to the first problem. But TQM will not prevent a recurrence of the second problem or cause the supervisors to wonder why they never acted. To understand why this is so, we need to know more about how learning takes place and about at least two mechanisms that keep it from taking place at all.

As I have emphasized in my previous articles on learning in the workplace, learning occurs in two forms: single-loop and double-loop. Single-loop learning asks a one-dimensional question to elicit a one-dimensional answer. My favorite example is a thermostat, which measures ambient temperature against a standard setting and turns the heat source on or off accordingly. The whole transaction is binary.

Double-loop learning takes an additional step or, more often than not, several additional steps. It turns the question back on the questioner. It asks what the media call follow-ups. In the case of the thermostat, for instance, double-loop learning would wonder whether the current setting was actually the most effective temperature at which to keep the room and, if so, whether the present heat source was the most effective means of achieving it. A double-loop process might also ask why the current setting was chosen in the first place. In other words, double-loop learning asks questions not only about objective facts but also about the reasons and motives behind those facts.

Here is a simple illustration of the difference between these two kinds of learning: A CEO who had begun to practice his own form of management-by-walking-around learned from his employees that the company inhibited innovation by subjecting every new idea to more than 275 separate checks and sign-offs. He promptly appointed a task force to look at this situation, and it eliminated 200 of the obstacles. The result was a higher innovation rate.

This may sound like a successful managerial intervention. The CEO discovers a counterproductive process and, with the cooperation of others, produces dramatic improvement. Yet I would call it a case of single-loop learning. It addresses a difficulty but ignores a more fundamental problem. A more complete diagnosis – that is to say, a double-loop approach to this situation – would require the CEO to ask the employees who told him about the sign-offs some tougher questions about company culture and their own behavior. For example, "How long have you known about the 275 required sign-offs?" Or "What goes on in this company that prevented you from questioning these practices and getting them corrected or eliminated?"

Why didn't the CEO ask these questions of the supervisor? And why didn't the 40 supervisors ask these questions of themselves? There are two closely related mechanisms at work here–one social, the other psychological.

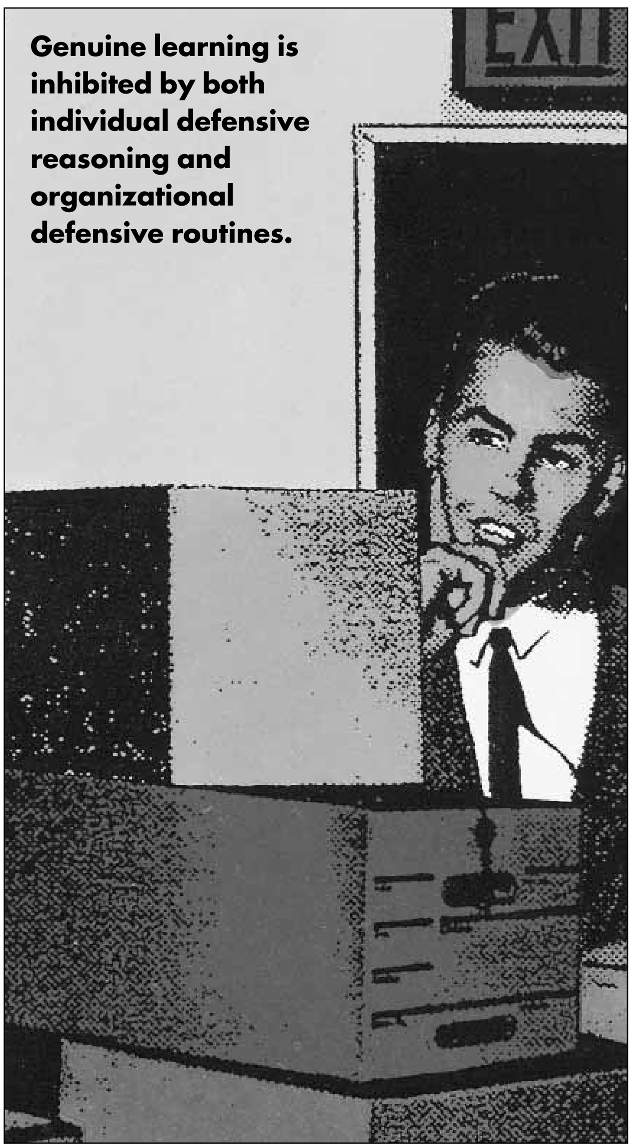
The social reason that the CEO did not dig deeper is that doing so might have been seen as putting people on the spot. Unavoidably, digging deeper would have uncovered the employees' collusion with the inefficient process. Their motives were probably quite decent – they didn't want to open Pandora's box, didn't want to be negative. But their behavior – and the behavior of the CEO in ignoring this dimension of the problem – combined with everyone's failure to examine his or her individual behavior and blocked the kind of learning that is crucial to organizational effectiveness.

In the name of positive thinking, in other words, managers often censor what everyone needs to say and hear. For the sake of "morale" and "considerateness," they deprive employees and themselves of the opportunity to take responsibility for their own behavior by learning to understand it. Because double-loop learning depends on questioning one's own assumptions and behavior, this apparently benevolent strategy is actually *anti*learning. Admittedly, being considerate and positive can contribute to the solution of single-loop problems like cutting costs. But it will never help people figure out why they lived with problems for years on end, why they covered up those problems, why they covered up the cover-up, why they were so good at pointing to the responsibility of others and so slow to focus on their own. The 40 supervisors said it was high time that management took steps. None of them asked why they themselves had never even drawn management's attention to nine areas of waste and inefficiency.

In the name of positive thinking, managers often censor what they see as a Pandora's box of problems.

What we see here is managers using socially "upbeat" behavior to inhibit learning. What we do not see, at least not readily, is why anyone should want to inhibit learning. The reason lies in a set of deeper and more complex psychological motives.

Consider again the story of the 40 supervisors. TQM's rigorous, linear reasoning solves a set of important, single-loop problems. But while we see some effective single-loop learning, no double-loop learning occurs at all. Instead, the moment the important problems involve potential threat or embarrassment, rigorous reasoning goes right out the window and *defensive reasoning* takes over. Note how the supervisors deftly sidestep all responsibility and defend themselves against the charge of inaction – or worse, collusion – by blaming others. In fact, what I call defensive reasoning serves no purpose except self-protection, though the people who use it rarely acknowledge that they are protecting themselves. It is the group, the department, the organization that they are protecting, in the name of being positive. They believe themselves to be using the kind of rigorous thinking employed in TQM, which identifies problems, gathers objective data, postulates causes, tests explanations, and derives corrective action, all along relatively scientific lines. But the supervisors' actual techniques – gathering data selectively, postulating only causes that do not threaten themselves, testing explanations in ways that are sloppy and self-serving – are a parody of scientific method. The supervisors are not protecting others; they are



blaming them. They have learned this procedure carefully over time, supported at each step by defensive organizational rationalizations like "caring" and "thoughtfulness."

The reason the supervisors fail to question their own rather remarkable behavior – the reason they so instinctively and thoroughly avoid double-loop learning – is psychological. It has to do with the mental models that we all develop early in life for dealing with emotional or threatening issues.

In the process of growing up, all of us learn and warehouse master programs for dealing with difficult situations. These programs are sets of rules we use to design our own actions and interpret the actions of others. We retrieve them whenever we need to diagnose a problem or invent or size up a solution. Without them, we'd have to start from scratch each time we faced a challenge.

One of the puzzling things about these mental models is that when the issues we face are embarrassing or threatening, the master programs we actually use are rarely the ones we think we use. Each of us has what I call an *espoused theory of action* based on principles and precepts that fit our intellectual backgrounds and commitments. But most of us have quite a different *theory-in-use* to which we resort in moments of stress. And very few of us are aware of the contradiction between the two. In short, most of us are consistently inconsistent in the way we act.

Espoused theories differ widely, but most theories-in-use have the same set of four governing values. All of us design our behavior in order to remain in unilateral control, to maximize winning and minimize losing, to suppress negative feelings, and to be as rational as possible, by which we mean laying out clear-cut goals and then evaluating our own behavior on the basis of whether or not we've achieved them.

The purpose of this strategy is to avoid vulnerability, risk, embarrassment, and the appearance of incompetence. In other words, it is a deeply defensive strategy and a recipe for ineffective learning. We might even call it a recipe for antilearning, because it helps us avoid reflecting on the counterproductive consequences of our own behavior. Theories-in-use assume a world that prizes unilateral control and winning above all else, and in that world, we focus primarily on controlling others and on making sure that we are not ourselves controlled. If any reflection does occur, it is in the service of winning and controlling, not of opening ourselves to learning.

Defensive strategies discourage reflection in another way as well. Because we practice them most of our lives, we are all highly skilled at carrying them out. Skilled actions are second nature; we rarely reflect on what we take for granted.

In studies of more than 6,000 people, I have found this kind of defensive theory-in-use to be universal, with no measurable difference by country, age, sex, ethnic identity, education, wealth, power, or experience. All over the world, in every kind of business and organization, in every kind of crisis and dilemma, the principles of defensive reasoning encourage people to leave their own behavior unexamined and to avoid any objective test of their premises and conclusions.

As if this individual defensive reasoning were not enough of a problem, genuine learning in organizations is inhibited by a second universal phenomenon that I call *organizational defensive routines*. These consist of all the policies, practices, and actions that prevent human beings from having to experience embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevent them from examining the nature and causes of that embarrassment or threat.

Take face-saving. To work, it must be unacknowledged. If you tell your subordinate Fred that you are saving his face, you have defeated your own purpose. What you do tell Fred is a fiction about the success of his own decision and a lie about your reasons for rescinding it. What's more, if Fred correctly senses the mixed message, he will almost certainly say nothing.

The logic here, as in all organizational defensive routines, is unmistakable: send a mixed message ("Your decision was a good one, and I'm overruling it"); pretend it is not mixed ("You can be proud of your contribution"); make the mixed message and the pretense undiscussable ("I feel good about this outcome, and I'm sure you do too"); and, finally, make the undiscussability undiscussable ("Now that I've explained everything to your satisfaction, is there anything *else* you'd like to talk about?").

Defensive reasoning occurs when individuals make their premises and inferences tacit, then draw conclusions that cannot be tested except by the tenets of this tacit logic. Nothing could be more detrimental to organizational learning than this process of elevating individual defensive tactics to an organizational routine.

Yet whenever managers are trying to get at the truth about problems that are embarrassing or threatening, they are likely to stumble into the same set of predictable pitfalls. Asked to examine their own behavior or the behavior of subordinates, people in this situation are likely:

□ To reason defensively and to interact with others who are reasoning defensively;
□ To get superficial, single-loop responses that lead to superficial, single-loop solutions;
□ To reinforce the organizational defensive routines that inhibit access to valid information and genuine learning;
□ To be unaware of their own defenses because these are so skilled and automatic; and
□ To be unaware that they are producing any of these consequences, or, if they *are* aware of defensiveness, to see it only in others.

Given all these built-in barriers to self-understanding and self-examination under threatening conditions, it is a wonder that organizational learning takes place at all. It is an even greater wonder when we realize that many of the forms of communication that management works so hard to perfect actually reinforce those barriers. Yet this is exactly what they do.

We have seen a couple of examples of management's "benevolent" censorship of true but negative messages. In addition, we have looked at the psychological mechanisms that lead employees, supervisors, managers, and executives to engage in personal and collective defensive routines. The question we still have to answer is precisely how modern corporate communications succeed in actually contributing to this censorship and these defensive routines.

They do so in two explicit ways. First, they create a bias against personal learning and commitment in the way they parcel out roles and responsibilities in every survey, dialogue, and conversation. Second, they open a door to defensive reasoning – and close one on individual self-awareness – in the way they continuously emphasize extrinsic as opposed to intrinsic motivation.

First, consider the way roles and responsibilities are assigned in manager-employee (or leader-subordinate) conversations, interviews, and surveys. There seem to be two rules. Rule number one is that employees are to be truthful and forthcoming about the world they work in, about norms, procedures, and the strengths and weaknesses of their superiors. All other aspects of their role in the life of the organization – their goals, feelings, failings, and conflicted motives – are taken for granted and remain unexamined. Rule number two is that top-level managers, who play an intensely scrutinized role in the life of the company, are to assume virtually all responsibility for employee well-being and organizational success. Employees must tell the truth as they see it; leaders must modify their own and the company's behavior. In other words, employees educate, and managers act.

Take the case of Acme, a large, multinational energy company with 6,000 employees. Under increasing competitive pressure, the company was forced to downsize, and to no one's surprise, morale was failing fast. To learn as much as possible about its own shortcomings and how to correct them, Acme management designed and conducted an employee survey with the help of experts, and 95% of employees responded. Of those responding, 75% agreed on five positive points:

☐ They were proud to work for Acme.
☐ Their job satisfaction was very high.
☐ They found their immediate supervisors fair and technically competent.
☐ They believed management was concerned for their welfare.
☐ They felt competent to perform their own jobs.

Some 65% of the respondents also indicated some concerns:

☐ They were skeptical about management's capacity to take initiative, communicate candidly, and act effectively.
☐ They described Acme's corporate culture as one of blame.
☐ They complained that managers, while espousing empowerment, were strongly attached to their own unilateral control.

The CEO read the first set of findings to mean that employees were basically satisfied and loyal. He saw the second set as a list of problems that he must make a serious effort to correct. And so the CEO replaced several top managers and arranged for the reeducation of the whole management team, including himself and his direct reports. He announced that Acme would no longer tolerate a culture of blame. He introduced training programs to make managers more forthright and better able to take initiative. And he promised to place greater emphasis on genuine empowerment.

The CEO's logic went like this: My employees will identify the problems. I'll fix them by creating a new vision, defining new practices and policies, and selecting a top management team genuinely committed to them. Change will inevitably follow.

I think most managers would call this a success story. If we dig deeper, however, we see a pattern I've observed hundreds of times. Underneath the CEO's aggressive action, important issues have been bypassed, and the bypass has been covered up.

When the CEO took his new team on a five-day retreat to develop the new strategy and plan its implementation, he invited me to come along. In the course of the workshop, I asked each participant to write a simple case in a format I have found to be a powerful tool in predicting how executives will deal with difficult issues during implementation. The method also reveals contradictions between what the executives say and what they do and highlights their awareness of these discrepancies.

I asked each member of the team to write one or two sentences describing one important barrier to the new strategy and another three or four sentences telling how they would overcome that barrier. Then I asked them to split the rest of the page in half. On one side, they were to write an actual or imagined dialogue with a subordinate about the issue in question. On the other side, they were to note any unsaid or unsayable thoughts or feelings they might have about this conversation. I asked them to continue this script for several pages. When they were finished, the group as a whole discussed each case at some length, and we recorded the discussions. The ability to replay key sections made it easier for the participants to score themselves on candor, forthrightness, and the extent to which their comments and behavior encouraged genuine employee commitment – the three values that the CEO had directed the executives to foster.

All of the executives chose genuinely important issues around resistance to change. But all of them dealt with the resistance they expected from subordinates by easing in, covering up, and avoiding candor and plain speaking. They did so in the name of minimizing subordinates' defensiveness and in hopes of getting them to buy into change. The implicit logic behind their scripts went something like this:

☐ Hide your fears about the other person's likely resistance to change. Cover this fear with persistent positiveness. Pretend the two of you agree, especially when you know you don't.
☐ Deal with resistant responses by stressing the problem rather than the resistance. Be positive. Keep this strategy a secret.
☐ If this approach doesn't work, make it clear that you won't take no for an answer. After all, you're the boss.

Imagine this kind of logic applied to sensitive issues in hundreds of conversations with employees. It's not hard to guess what the response will be, and it certainly isn't buy-in.

What happened to candor, forthrightness, and commitment building? All the executives failed to walk their talk, and all were unaware of their own inconsistency. When I pointed out the gap between action and intention, most saw it at once. Most were surprised that they hadn't seen it before. Most were quick to recognize inconsistency in others, but their lack of awareness with regard to their own inconsistency was systematic.

I know of only one way to get at these inconsistencies, and that is to focus on them. In the Acme case, the CEO managed to ignore the fact that the survey results didn't compute: on the one hand, employees said they were proud to work for the company and described management as caring; on the other, they doubted management's candor and competence. How could they hold both views? How could they be proud to work for a company whose managers were ineffective and inconsistent?

The CEO did not stop to explore any of these contradictions before embarking on corrective action. Had he done so, he might have discovered that the employees felt strong job satisfaction precisely *because* management never asked them to accept personal responsibility for Acme's poor competitive performance. Employees could safely focus their skepticism on top management because they had learned to depend on top management for their welfare. They claimed to value empowerment when in reality they valued dependence. They claimed commitment to the company when in reality they were committed only to the principle that management should make all the tough decisions, guarantee their employment, and pay them fairly. This logic made sense to employees, but it was *not* the kind of commitment that management had in mind.

None of these issues was ever discussed with employees, and none was raised in the leadership workshops. No effort was made to explore the concept of loyalty that permitted, indeed encouraged, managers to think one thing and say another. No attempt was made to help employees understand the role they played in the "culture of blame" that they'd named in the survey as one of their chief concerns. Above all, no one tried to untangle the defensive logic that contributed so mightily to these inconsistencies and that so badly needed critical examination. In fact, when I asked the management team why they had not discussed these questions, one person told me, "Frankly, until you started asking these questions, it just didn't occur to us. I see your point, but trying to talk to our people about this could be awfully messy. We're really trying to be *positive* here, and this would just stir things up."

The Acme story is a very common one: lots of energy is expended with little lasting progress. Employee surveys like the one Acme conducted – and like most other forms of leader-subordinate communication – have a fundamentally antimanagement bias whenever they deal with double-loop issues. They encourage employees *not* to reflect on their own behavior and attitudes. By assigning all the responsibility for fixing problems to management, they encourage managers *not* to relinquish the top-down, command-and-control mind-set that prevents empowerment.

The employees at Acme, like the 40 supervisors who were wined and dined for their TQM accomplishments, will continue to do what's asked of them as long as they feel adequately rewarded. They will follow the rules, but they will not take initiative, they will not take risks, and they are very unlikely to engage in double-loop learning. In short, they will not adopt the new behaviors and frames of reference so critical to keeping their companies competitive.

Over the last few years, I have come in contact with any number of companies struggling with this transition from command-and-control hierarchy to employee empowerment and organizational learning, and every one of them is its own worst enemy. Managers embrace the language of intrinsic motivation but fail to see how firmly mired in the old extrinsic world their communications actually are. This is the second explicit way in which corporate communications contribute to nonlearning.

Take the case of the 1,200-person operations division of what I'll call Europabank, where employee commitment to customer service was about to become a matter of survival. The bank's CEO had decided to spin off the division, and its future depended on its ability to *earn* customer loyalty. Europabank's CEO felt confident that the employees could become more market-oriented. Because he knew they would have to take more initiative and risk, he created small project groups to work out all the implementation details and get employees to buy into the new mission. He was pleased with the way the organization was responding.

The vice president for human resources was not so pleased. He worried that the buy-in wasn't genuine and that his boss was overly optimistic. Not wanting to be negative, however, he kept his misgivings to himself.

In order to assess what was really going on here, I needed to know more about the attitudes behind the CEO's behavior. I asked him for some written examples of how he would answer employee concerns about the spin-off. What would he say to allay their doubts and build their commitment? Here are two samples of what he wrote:

☐ "If the employees express fear about the new plan because the 'old' company guaranteed employment, say: 'The new organization will do its utmost to guarantee employment and better prospects for growth. I promise that.'"

□ "If the employees express fear that they are not used to dealing with the market approach, say: 'I promise you will get the education you need, and I will ensure that appropriate actions are rewarded.'"

When these very situations later arose and he made these very statements to employees, their reactions were positive. They felt that the CEO really cared about them.

But look at the confusion of messages and roles. If the CEO means to give these employees a sense of their own power over their own professional fate – and that was his stated intent – then why emphasize instead what *he* will do for *them*? Each time he said, "I promise you," the CEO undermined his own goal of creating internal commitment, intrinsic motivation, and genuine empowerment.

He might have begun to generate real buy-in by pointing out to employees that their wishes were unreasonable. They want management to deal with their fears and reassure them that everything will turn out for the best. They want management to take responsibility for a challenge that is theirs to face. In a market-driven business, the CEO cannot possibly give the guarantees these employees want. The employees see the CEO as caring when he promises to protect and reward them. Unfortunately, this kind of caring disempowers, and someday it will hurt both the employees and the company.

Once employees base their motivation on extrinsic factors – the CEO's promises – they are much less likely to take chances, question established policies and practices, or explore the territory that lies beyond the company vision as defined by management. They are much less likely to learn.

Externally committed employees believe that management manipulates them and see loyalty as allowing the manipulation to take place. They will give honest responses to a direct question or a typical employee survey because they will be glad to tell management what's wrong. They will see it as a loyal act. What they are *not* likely to do is examine the risky issues surrounding their dependence, their ambivalence, and their avoidance of personal responsibility. Employees will commit to TQM, for example, if they believe that their compensation is just and that their managers are fair and trustworthy. However, these conditions, like the commitment they produce, come from an outside source: management.

This is external commitment, and external commitment harnesses external motivation. The energy available for work derives from extrinsic factors like good pay, well-designed jobs, and management promises. Individuals whose commitment and motivation are external depend on their managers to give them the incentive to work.

I recently watched a videotape of the CEO of a large airline meeting with relatively upper-level managers. The CEO repeatedly emphasized the importance of individual empowerment at all levels of the organization. At one point in the tape, a young manager identified a problem that top managers at the home office had prevented him from resolving. The CEO thanked the man and then asked him to go directly to the senior vice president who ran the department in question and raise the issue again. In the meantime, he said, he would pave the way. By implication, he encouraged all the managers present to take the initiative and come to him if they encountered bureaucratic barriers.

I watched this video with a group of some 80 senior executives. All but one praised the CEO for empowering the young manager. The single dissenter wondered out loud about the quality of the empowerment, which struck him as entirely external, entirely dependent on the action of the CEO.

I agreed with that lonely voice. The CEO could have opened a window into genuine empowerment for the young manager by asking a few critical questions: What had the young man done to communicate his sense of disempowerment to those who blocked him? What fears would doing so have triggered? How could the organization redesign itself to give young managers the freedom and safety to take such initiatives? For that matter, the CEO could have asked these same questions of his senior vice presidents.

By failing to explore the deeper issues – and by failing to encourage his managers to do the same – all the CEO did was promise to lend the young manager some high-level executive power and authority the next time he had a problem. In other words, the CEO built external commitment and gave his manager access to it. What he did *not* do was encourage the young man to build permanent empowerment for himself on the basis of his own insights, abilities, and prerogatives.

Companies that hope to reap the rewards of a committed, empowered workforce have to learn to stop kidding themselves. External commitment, positive thinking at any price, employees protected from the consequences and even the knowledge of cause and effect – this mind-set may produce superficial honesty and single-loop learning, but it will never yield the kind of learning that might actually help a company change. The reason is quite simply that for companies to change, employees must take an active role not only in describing the faults of others but also in drawing out the truth about their *own* behavior and motivation. In my experience, moreover, employees dig deeper and harder into the truth when the task of scrutinizing the organization includes taking a good look at their own roles, responsibilities, and potential contributions to corrective action.

The problem is not that employees run away from this kind of organizational self-examination. The problem is that no one asks it of them. Managers seem to attach no importance to employees' feelings, defenses, and inner conflicts. Moreover, leaders focus so earnestly on "positive" values – employee satisfaction, upbeat attitude, high morale – that it would strike them as destructive to make demands on employee self-awareness.

But this emphasis on being positive is plainly counterproductive. First, it overlooks the critical role that dissatisfaction, low morale, and negative attitudes can play – often *should* play – in giving an accurate picture of organizational reality, especially with regard to threatening or sensitive issues. (For example, if employees are helping to eliminate their own jobs, why should we expect or encourage them to display high morale or disguise their mixed feelings?) Second, it condescendingly assumes that employees can only function in a cheerful world, even if the cheer is false. We make no such assumption about senior executives. We expect leaders to stand up and take their punches like adults, and we recognize that their best performance is often linked to shaky morale, job insecurity, high levels of frustration, and a vigilant focus on negatives. But leaders have a tendency to treat everyone below the top, including many of their managers, like members of a more fragile race, who can be productive only if they are contented.

Now, there is nothing wrong with contented people, if contentment is the only goal. My research suggests it is possible to achieve quite respectable productivity with middling commitment and morale. The key is a system of external compensation and job security that employees consider fair. In such a system, superficial answers to critical questions produce adequate results, and no one demands more.

But the criteria for effectiveness and responsibility have risen sharply in recent years and will rise more sharply still in the decades to come. A generation ago, business wanted employees to do exactly what they were told, and company leadership bought their acquiescence with a system of purely extrinsic rewards. Extrinsic motivation had fairly narrow boundaries – defined by phrases like "That's not my job" – but it did produce acceptable results with a minimum of complication.

Today, facing competitive pressures an earlier generation could hardly have imagined, managers need employees who think constantly and creatively about the needs of the organization. They need employees with as much *intrinsic* motivation and as deep a sense of organizational stewardship as any company executive. To bring this about, corporate communications must demand more of everyone involved. Leaders and subordinates alike – those who ask and those who answer – must all begin struggling with a new level of self-awareness, candor, and responsibility.

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