Stanford eCorner

The Importance of Authentic Communication

Sheryl Sandberg, *Facebook*

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Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, talks about the importance of communication in scaling one's own career and business relationships. She recommends that rather than stating opinions as facts, managers state beliefs and the facts that support it, and encourage others to do the same, as a tool to encourage better information sharing. She also encourages everyone to take full responsibility for the actions, and to make them personal, stating that this ownership is a crucial building block at all stages of one's career.

Transcript

I think for all of us at every stage in our career, there's also something really deep to think about in terms of how we interact. Once again, how do you scale yourself in compelling ways? And then I'll mention two thoughts and there are two thoughts I learned from a man named Fred Kofman I have a great deal of respect for. He runs a consulting firm called Axialent and Fred was an MIT professor. He is an accounting professor and he learned tons of stuff about accounting. And then one day he realized that wow, all the really hard things are not about accounting, they're all about how people interact. How they scale themselves vis-a-vis other people. And he talks about two concepts I think are really important. The first is authentic communication and the second is what he calls "Being a player not a victim." If you have children, and I do now, you actually learn from them almost how dishonest every adults are all the time. So my favorite story is my friend Beth, this is a true story. She was pregnant, she'd a five year old and the five year old said to her, "Mommy where's the baby?" She was like, "That baby is in my tummy." He's like, "Mommy, where's the baby?" She's like, "Well, the baby is in my tummy," like "Well mommy, aren't the baby's arms in your arms, and the baby's legs in your legs and all that?" And she was like, "No, no the whole baby is in my tummy." And then you know her five year old looked at her and said, "Then mommy, what's growing on your butt?" Kids are really honest.

I mean my four year old will be like, "Mommy, that's an ugly shirt" or "Mommy, I don't like that story." And as we get older polite society teaches us to have better manners, and we don't walk around telling pregnant women that their butts look big. Please learn that lesson, I'm not suggesting that. And we don't walk around just blunting out the blunt truth, but when we're polite. But you have to ask yourself if you're in a group whether it's a friend group or a family circle or in a business that you're trying to lead as an entrepreneur; how do you get to the truth? How do you make great decisions when no one saying the truth? How do you communicate authentically? How do you figure out what to say and what not to say in a way that's authentic? And what Fred says, and I really believe this is true, is it starts from the fundamental understanding that there is no truth. There's my truth, there's your truth that everything is subjective. And so if you always start from the position of this is what I believe, I don't expect you to believe it, I don't think you have to believe it I'm not saying it's true, you can actually always communicate authentically. Because if you walk in the room - and this gets worse as you get more senior - here is the answer, you're not giving anyone else any room to say anything. And if you walk in the room and say, "I believe this for this reason. What to do you believe?" If you share your truth in that language you give people room to communicate authentically and that is hugely important in to these relationships at any stage. The second thing he talks about a lot is being a player not a victim.

And if you listen you'd realize once again to children or to others, that children speak in a passive voice when something they don't like happens. "Mommy the toy broke." Interesting. You're on this side of the room, the toy just up and broke, right?

Just up and broke, I didn't do anything. The toy broke. That's same person comes to work: The project didn't get finished. Shocking! The project didn't finish itself, right? How often do people use the passive voice? Now, there is no such thing as complete control, nothing. No one has complete control in any situation. People that leading organization in some ways have less, because not only do they have to control what they do, they have to help persuade everyone else what they do. But if you are able to take responsibility: "I'm not late because there was traffic. I'm late because I didn't leave early enough to account for the fact that there was traffic." "The project didn't get finished not because my friend, my partner didn't do it, my colleague didn't do his part.

The project didn't get finished because I didn't set up a team where my colleague wanted to do his part." When you take responsibility and you take full responsibility, that is the most empowering thing, and you can do it at any stage. You have to do it if you are raising money as an entrepreneur. You have to do it if you are trying to persuade people to work with you. You have to do it at all stages. And it is in that authentic communication and it is in that taking full responsibility that we really find the power to scale ourselves and have the kind of impact we want to have.