



Stanford eCorner

Listening for the Truth

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Not only can some bosses be difficult to talk to, but there are a number of institutional structures in place that make it difficult for them to hear the truth. Stanford Professor Bob Sutton bullet points many documented human behaviors that make it difficult for managers to hear the whole story. For example, research shows that people like flattery - even if its false - and people tend not to like those who deliver bad news.



Transcript

What I'm basically saying is that bosses need to be in a position where they hear the truth and people tell them the truth. Well, hearing the truth is the listening part, but there's a whole bunch of things about organizational life that give the people you lead a lot of incentive to not tell you the truth. Let me start out on the research on flattery before I get to the mum effect. Research on flattery shows, quite convincingly, that if you want somebody to like them, you not only should flatter them, you might as well do false flattery. In fact, the research shows that when somebody flatters us falsely and we know it, we still like them more. So to give you, I guess, my favorite example, I have a colleague at the business school, Rod Kramer. We've been colleagues 25 years. Whenever I see Rod, probably once a year, he almost always says the same thing to me, which is, "Bob, you've lost weight." OK? If I was to tell you the truth, I really have usually not lost weight, but whenever Rod says that, I like him more. OK? And I think that's kind of the human condition. Now, you put that in a hierarchy position, that's what people are doing to their boss because they want to get ahead.

Now to make matters worse, there's this thing called the 'mum effect' which is that we've got a lot of evidence that when people deliver us bad news, we like them less. So, you think about it: if you're the smart subordinate, you want to get ahead, what do you do? You flatter your boss and you don't deliver bad news to him or her. But the problem is, when you start adding up the hierarchical effects, that it's really hard when you're the boss to actually get bad news. So a great example of this, Richard Feynman. OK, this is a great test. This is like the leading engineering school in the world. How many people have heard of Richard Feynman? Come on. So more people than Jimmy Buffett. This is a pretty good crowd, actually. So, Richard Feynman was a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, also just sort of like a nut.

I mean, one of my favorite stories about him was that he wrote like a 50-page article about something and stuck it in his drawer and forgot about it. Somebody else won a Nobel Prize for it about six or seven years later. He shrugged his shoulders. And so one of the things that he did towards the end of his life is he was put on the Rogers Commission, and the purpose of the Rogers Commission was to figure out why the Challenger space shuttle exploded. And so the reason it says he went rogue is Rogers, who was a head of the commission, told him to sort of be a good boy and follow orders and to not ask questions. But what he did was he kind of bought his own plane tickets and flew around. He did a whole bunch of independent interviews to figure out what went on. By the way, as part of those independent interviews, he was the one who figured out the seals were the reason that it exploded and convinced Congress using a little sort of basic physics. But one of the questions he asked in the process, he'd go around and he asked this question. He would ask people around NASA, "What is the probability that the main engine of the shuttle would fail?" This is something that still hasn't happened.

Hypothetical. So the engineers, the people at the bottom, they estimated the odds were 1 in 200--and I love this, it shows you how in touch our leaders are--the senior executives estimated 1 in 100,000. And I would submit, you don't know all the

causes of this, but certainly some of the ass-kissing and the difficulty with breaking bad news, I would argue, is part of it.