

## If You Can See Through Me Am I Still There?

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What if they disagree with me? What if the wrong person learns my secrets? What if they don't like me? If you've ever considered these questions at work, you are contemplating what it means to be a transparent and authentic leader.

Trust in individual businesses, as well as entire industries, politicians and professional service providers is eroding at an alarming rate. Trust is being used as a competitive advantage by those firms that can credibly tout their integrity. One key to building trust is to be clear about what you stand for, behave consistently across situations—and tell the truth. While savvy leaders adapt to the nuances of the situation, they work from a core of principles that shine through in day-to-day actions. Gay Hendricks summarized:

***The mastery of integrity comes down to three things: being authentic with yourself, being authentic with others, and doing what you have said you would do.***

Few people would argue with the premise that leadership integrity and the trust it produces is facilitated by authenticity and consistency. The difficulty is that authenticity can't exist without transparency. Transparency is often inhibited by concerns about being accepted by others, concerns regarding the messiness associated with natural conflict and trepidation about releasing information.

Transparency does not mean being impervious to situational expectations by using honesty as a weapon or blurting out one's first thought. Mastering the paradox of being both transparent and insightfully adaptive revolves around considering the impact of personal disclosure, organizational norms and information dissemination.

### Personal Disclosure

Appropriate personal disclosure refers to choosing the information you want to share with others about yourself, acknowledging data you would choose not to disclose but is somehow publicly available and discerning information that is appropriate to the situation.

Executives are regularly scrutinized by employees, board members, customers and others. Although it is tough to admit, most employees aren't friends; they are colleagues. So transparency becomes a complicated concept for leaders. Answering one question that requires personal disclosure may build trust, while another is merely interesting fodder for gossip. Non-threatening facts or insights build rapport, invite appropriate relationships and provide perspectives about thinking and decision-making processes. That type of information empowers others to work best with their leader.

There are risks to personal disclosure. In the real world versus the ideal world, judgments about whether or not you are similar to colleagues may affect decisions that are made about you. You may ask: "If others know my personal beliefs will they retaliate in a way that is detrimental to my career?" Situations in which this happens are evident. For example, a recent runner up to Miss USA was thought to have lost the crown based her opinion about gay marriage. When co-workers have information about your personal past, your beliefs and your affiliations, they may interpret your actions accordingly. Full, incorrect or partial information may get to others who don't know you well and it may color their views.

Employees are curious about their leaders. Consider whether anything can be kept a secret. Today's real-time information exchange makes personal transparency a bigger deal than ever. There is a wealth of information publicly available on sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

When considering what to disclose, ask yourself this series of questions:

- What purpose does the information serve?
- What are the common-sense, reasonable risks of sharing it? Do I care about those risks?
- Would I regret sharing the information if it became public information?

### **Organizational Norms**

Some businesses, families or other organizations value candid sharing of information while others discourage genuine conversations. Lack of candor can show up in various degrees as withholding, sugar-coating or even two-faced communication. It takes courage to speak the truth in some circumstances and organizations; even more courage is required to hear someone else's views when you are implicated or disagree.

In many companies, candor has been replaced with political correctness and the real issues never get surfaced. While there are many reasons these politically correct cultures have evolved, one reason is that people lack skillful ways of conveying difficult or sensitive information. Courageous, respectful and candid communication is not synonymous with blurting out the first thing that crosses one's mind. Some people use "transparency" as an excuse for being hurtful. In the extreme case, they may lack impulse control in filtering what is in their head through considerations of the place, listener and their own biases. Ill effects result and once burned, people are reticent to share.

Healthy filtering considers the situational attributes in selecting the message, timing and medium. Influential leaders are thoughtful about what they want the other person to know, believe or feel as a result of the interaction. They are transparent while being observant of the behaviors appropriate for certain situations.

Leaders must move beyond being politically correct to talk about the real issues. It is truly a competitive advantage.

### **Information Disclosure**

Some people view information as power and try to promote themselves by withholding it from others. Some leaders have concerns about the ability or trustworthiness of others to use the information appropriately. Still others use "partial disclosure" to manipulate outcomes based on their own agenda.

Surveys of organizational climate consistently cite lack of communication about organizational strategy plans, and results as a key impediment to success. Leaders should explore what information is important to their employees and share as freely as possible. Help employees understand the risks in using certain information and model openness in indicating that there are some types of information you will not or cannot share. Employees are unable to do their jobs credibly without the needed information and context.

All parties to a conversation have the right to shape it. Sometimes behaving with integrity includes choosing what to answer and deciding what can't be answered. It is better to say "I can't say" than to avoid or shade the truth. If the situational boundaries are straightforward, the answer can address what you *can* discuss. Examples are: "I can't address the earnings report. What I can share is that we have made a decision to put the acquisition on hold." Or "I can't share details of the new structure before it has been finalized. What I would like to do is explain the reasons we need to make changes, get your feedback and answer any questions I am able to." Sometimes people pose questions framed around assumptions with which the speaker does not agree or are inaccurate. Careful listening and transparent responses reframe assumptions with facts.

Disseminating information gives the receiver responsibility for using it wisely. And information sharing often invites feedback. We can choose whether or not we accept the feedback. Regardless, sharing appropriate information empowers others and does not diminish your power or authority.

Transparency in action is *simple not easy*:

- Remember that no matter what your life choices are, some people will like you and others won't. As leaders, strive to be someone that others want to follow because of your consistent principles and authenticity.
- Determine the risks and rewards of disclosing personal information.
- In each interaction, determine what you want others to know, believe and feel as a result of the interaction.
- Don't beat around the bush and at the same time, apply a reasonableness filter to your answers. Leaders benefit from observing a momentary pause before they react with the first thing on their mind. Your words or non-verbal responses can't be taken back.
- Share relevant information. Remain steadfast when others try to goad you into responding about something you cannot disclose. Learn how to express "I can't say" in a congruent and authentic way.
- Owning up to your accountability demonstrates transparency. Admitting you are wrong takes a healthy balance of confidence and appropriate information sharing.
- Avoid inflating your own role or value. Generously acknowledge the contributions of others.
- Establish your core messages so that you don't "straddle the fence" by giving differing messages to varying constituencies.

Effective leaders are confident in who they are and allow others a peek at their core being. Their core is present no matter who is "seeing through" the mantle they wear for their role. Transparent leaders are trusted and respected for their straightforward authenticity. Leaders don't have to be perfect; they must be genuine. ■■

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