BREAKING THE ORGANIZATIONAL CODE OF SILENCE

We've all heard the adage "Silence is golden," but how many of us realize the potentially negative impact that following this old saw can have in the workplace? In "Is Silence Killing Your Company?" (*Harvard Business Review*, May 2003), Leslie Perlow and Stephanie Williams cite their research, which shows that "silence is not only ubiquitous and expected in organizations but extremely costly to both the firm and the individual." They interviewed senior executives and employees from a wide diversity of organizations and discovered that "silence can exact a high psychological price on individuals, generating feelings of humiliation, pernicious anger, resentment, and the like that, if unexpressed, contaminate every interaction, shut down creativity, and undermine productivity." In these challenging economic times, how many businesses can afford the costs that occur when employees keep mum?

Spiral of Silence

But how can simply keeping our opinions to ourselves undermine organizational success? Perlow and Williams describe a destructive "spiral of silence" that begins when someone chooses to keep her mouth shut about a problem or issue. The reasons for doing so usually involve preserving a relationship, maintaining one's status within a group, conforming with the consensus perspective, or avoiding conflict. In other cases, a superior may actually try to stifle concerns or criticisms from a direct report to expedite the work on a project.

But rather than resolving anything, this kind of censorship—either internally or externally imposed—can lead an individual to experience a series of negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, or resentment. Such strong feelings can cause him to feel disconnected from and distrustful of the person or group involved in the discussion and to become increasingly defensive in interactions with others. This sense of insecurity can bring more acts of silence and even higher levels of anxiety and other unproductive emotions.

According to the authors, the ultimate irony of this dynamic is that "we don't speak up for fear of destroying our relationships, but in the end our silences create an emotional distance that becomes an unbridgeable rift." When that happens, thinking remains stagnant, alternative courses of action remain unexplored, and the quality of work falls. In this way, trying to avoid rocking the boat can actually sink the ship.

Speaking Up

If the spiral of silence is so pervasive in our workplaces, then how can we overcome it? First, we need to create an organizational climate in which people feel they can speak up without fear of repercussions. As Perlow and Williams say, "Managers with a lot of authority need to be especially careful not to punish people, explicitly or implicitly, for speaking out." At the same time, individuals can take the courageous step of expressing themselves in a constructive manner as well as valuing different opinions and perspectives. In addition, asking tough questions can be easier with the support of others who share the same perspective. Finally, taking these steps can be easier if we remember that we're doing so for the good of the company as a whole. As the authors say, "Don't forget: Your boss needs you, too. And knowing that should empower you to speak up and help him appreciate your point of view." ◘

—Janice Molloy

Causal loop diagrams don't need to be complex to offer insights—hone your skills by drawing some of the loops described in this article. Also consider the following: Where are the leverage points for change; that is, how might a small change in the structure lead to big results?

YOUR WORKOUT CHALLENGE

Systems Thinking Workout is designed to help you flex your systems thinking muscles. In this column, we introduce scenarios that contain interesting systemic structures. We then encourage you to read the story; identify what you see as the most relevant structures and themes; capture them graphically in causal loop diagrams, behavior over time graphs, or stock and flow diagrams; and, if you choose, send the diagrams to us with comments about why the dynamics you identified are important and where you think leverage might be for making lasting change. We'll publish selected diagrams and comments in a subsequent issue of the newsletter. Fax your diagrams and analysis to (781) 894-7175, or e-mail them to editorial@pegasuscom.com.

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