



THE MANAGERIAL MOMENT OF TRUTH

BY BRUCE BODAKEN AND ROBERT FRITZ

Truth is a tricky subject in any context. People rightly ask, what is the truth? How do we know? Are we really talking about truth or opinion? Isn't it dangerous to tell people the truth? Can they take it? Might we harm people by telling them the truth? And finally, how can we learn to see and then communicate what is true, and do so in ways that are positive, productive, practical, helpful, and effective?

Before answering these important questions, let us make this claim: *Truth is one of the most important competitive advantages there is in building a business.* Truth is the most vital element an organization has in fostering collective learning. When we are able to explore and then tell each other the truth, we can improve performance, both individually and collectively.

TEAM TIP

The story of the blind men and the elephant, fundamental to the discipline of systems thinking, holds rich possibilities for any team. When faced with an intractable problem, strive for your group to be the "smart blind men." Pool your knowledge of the system, based on your unique perspectives from your different places in the organization. Then design a way to gather information about the parts of the "elephant" you haven't yet encountered. To do so, you may need to interview people in other functions or from outside the enterprise. By compiling a complete description of the "elephant," you may discover synergies you didn't know existed or new ways of thinking about your organization.

Imagine trying to build an organization without the ability to tell each other the truth. We would not be able to correct mistakes, learn from past performances, adjust our processes, and better understand the reality in which we are engaged. In fact, a glaring statistic is that over 50 percent of

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businesses fail within their first three years. The reason they fail is that they don't know what is going on in reality, which may include their financial position, their impact on the marketplace, the nature of their customers' real motivations, and other key factors. Had they known the truth, they would have had a far greater chance of success. Without perceiving reality, it is next to impossible to succeed because invariably decisions are made in a vacuum.

There are many steps for improving performance: training, creating reinforcing reward systems, instituting effective computer systems, holding offsite planning meetings, developing the right hiring practices, and so on. Each step has its place in creating better performance, but the managerial moment of truth is the *essential* step that makes all the others work. Unless reality is penetrated, very little significant improvement can occur. It's sad to see time and energy invested in performance improvement, only to have it thwarted by what is missing in action—people speaking truthfully and honestly with one another. That is the

indispensable step in any organization that hopes to achieve greater capability, professionalism, and alignment.

A Common "Pitch"

Some would argue that human beings are incapable of objectivity because of the nature of perception, which they see as idiosyncratic. We can understand the world only through our senses, which we then interpret. We are left with opinion at best, and, therefore, no one is right or wrong.

These ideas are interesting, but they don't hold up to scrutiny. If we look to the aural realm of a musical pitch, we can see how universal human perception is, because not only can we hear the pitch that is sounding, we can also see it on an oscilloscope. If two musicians are playing out of tune with each other, most people can hear the dissonance. Yet even if they are tone deaf, they can see the actual waveform the dissonance creates on an oscilloscope. In a discipline like music, people don't talk about "my pitch [truth], and your pitch [truth]" when they have to play together. There is an objective reality they can understand, and because of that objectivity, more than one hundred people can play together in a symphony orchestra and all play in tune.

In this article, we talk about truth (small t) as objective, factual, and observable. A due date was made on time or it wasn't. The performance was adequate or it wasn't. The numbers are the numbers.

We also talk about areas that are not so clear-cut, questions that may be subject to differing opinions, such as acceptable levels of quality, personal alignment within a team, one's capabilities, skills, or attitude. *What is important is the spirit of inquiry we adopt.* We see the process as one of

pursuing, as best we can, the actual reality under consideration.

We are not content with simply sharing impressions or opinions. With what rigor do we seek to understand reality, even if what we find contradicts our pet theories, our years of experience, our outlook, philosophy, or worldview? Our personal notions notwithstanding, *what is the actual reality and how do we know it?*

The Blind Men and the Elephant

The managerial moment of truth approach is one of mutual exploration and learning. Together, we are backing up and studying reality. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing? Am I seeing what you are seeing? And where we are seeing reality differently from each other, how are we to understand why we are seeing it differently?” Rather than fight about who is right and who is wrong, together we are dedicating ourselves to observing reality and trying to better understand what we are seeing.

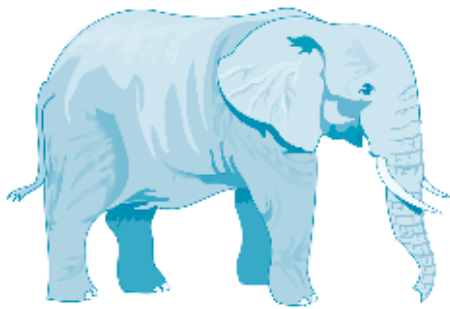
The old chestnut of the blind men and the elephant suggests that we can’t explore reality, only piece together differing opinions, all of which are valid.

In case you haven’t heard the original story for a while, here it is: Four blind men encountered an elephant. They began to reach out to touch the elephant to understand its shape. One blind man, who found the elephant’s tail, said, “An elephant is like a rope!” “No,” said another, who put his arms around the legs, “an elephant is like a tree trunk.” “Non-sense,” said another, who found the elephant’s trunk, “the elephant is like a hose.” Still another one of the men touched the elephant’s tusks: “The elephant is like large teeth.”

But when we think about it, shouldn’t we rename the story “The Stupid Blind Men and the Elephant”? After all, these people were arguing about each person’s perception, but

they weren’t asking each other how it came to pass that they had such vastly different ideas. The story is meant to tell us that everyone has a piece of the truth. Even though we may have vastly different ideas, they all reflect an aspect of reality.

Perhaps. But an elephant is more than something like a rope, a tree trunk, a hose, and big teeth. These are but elements that are seen from a fragmented and limited point of view. I may have wheels, doors, seats, and an engine, and yet I may not have a car. To understand that we are consid-



ering a car, we need to see the gestalt—the parts in relationship to the whole.

Let’s change the story to “The Smart Blind Men and the Elephant.” In

this story, one of the blind men says, “An elephant seems like a tree trunk,” and his friends say, “Okay, keep feeling around and then report what it’s like.” Over time, the team would be able to describe what an elephant is like by sharing their insights and then further exploring the parts of the elephant they haven’t yet encountered.

The Foundation of Opinions

In management, truth telling too often has come to mean simply sharing opinions. This is not what truth telling means to us. Trading opinions doesn’t usually lead to greater understanding. What’s missing is *the discipline to understand the foundation of various opinions*. We do that by measuring conclusions against reality. When we are objective, we don’t pick only the facts that support our opinions to the exclusion of facts that don’t. We are able to look at everything and allow ourselves to change our minds, alter our impressions, and abandon outdated ideas for ones that fit the facts.

Most of us have been taught to study reality in relationship to our theories, experiences, concepts, ideals,

and so on. The thought process then is one of comparison. We compare reality against our ideas about reality. This approach limits our ability to see those things that are inconsistent with our previous notions. When we think we know all the answers, we don’t ask targeted questions that enable us to explore new territory. But if we look anew, without presuming we know the answers to questions under consideration, we can discover new insights and relationships, rethink our assumptions, and go well beyond our basic suppositions.

Seeing reality objectively requires a large degree of rigor. Within the context of the organization, it also requires a process of collective inquiry. How can we bring people into the process? How can we consistently be willing to look at the hard facts? What would motivate us to strive for greater understanding, even when the exploration shines light on our own failings? How can we become better at our jobs and profession? How can we do that as a team and a company?

Telling the Truth

Unearthing the truth accurately is one thing. Telling it is yet another thing entirely. The classic line that reflects many managers’ reservations to call it like it is comes from the film *A Few Good Men* when the Jack Nicholson character says, “You can’t handle the truth.” Most of us have the general impression that the unabashed truth is hurtful and devastating. We have grown up in a society that agrees with the Jack Nicholson character.

Yet study after study has shown quite an opposite story. When there is a choice between knowing the unvarnished truth or not, people would rather know than be in the dark. Psychological studies consistently show that those who are in command of the facts are healthier than those who are not. One such study demonstrated that teenage pregnant girls who were flat out rejected by their families were more able to deal with their situation in a healthier and more productive way than those who were rejected but never told that directly.

The fact is we need to know where we stand with each other, not only teens in trouble, but managers from every level of the organization. Can people handle the truth? The resounding answer is Yes!

Having said that, we need to talk about the real world. The idea here is not just to tell the truth, but to have the telling of it be productive and helpful, and to lead to a positive change in the future. Telling the truth certainly involves a recitation of facts. But there is much more to communication than some clinical and cold statement of information. Motive makes a difference. What are we after? What do we want to accomplish? What type of relationship do we want with the people we work with? We need to make a clear distinction between attempting to manipulate a person and making a potentially tough conversation as accessible as we can make it.

Subtle and Overt Manipulation

The attempt to control the inner experience of another person to get him to do what we want him to do is the aim of manipulation. The underlying assumption here is that the person, left to his own devices, would not want to accomplish the goals. And because of that, the manager needs to make the person fall into line. Whether through charm or threats, the manager sees the job as getting a person to do what he hasn't freely chosen to do.

Managers can't build capacity through a manipulative approach because people react by becoming less self-generating. At best they can comply with directives. They cannot truly align with the direction leadership has chosen. This creates profound limitations to growth, development, and advancement for everyone.

If we think people can't handle the truth, we soften it. That's a manipulation. Or we sneak in the harsh facts between a series of compliments. That's a manipulation. Or we try to instill the fear of wrath to create a sense of urgency. That, too, is a manipulation. Manipulation can work to produce favorable results short-

term. Long-term the strategy backfires. Manipulation is one of the worst management approaches anyone can take because it undermines a sense of relationship and credibility between the manager and the person managed.

Yet too often managers feel they have no other choice if they are to be true to their accountabilities. So with the best of intentions, they try to find out what the market will bear and then play the game for all it's worth. The limitations to this approach are these: You can't build capacity over time, and you can't build real relationships with the people you manage.

Those organizations that cannot "handle the truth" will be left in the dust.

Manipulation harms relationships. This statement is true in every type of relationship, from the most intimate to the most professional. Rather than a sense of authentic relationship, people develop counterstrategies such as *don't show all your cards, hold back some level of involvement, don't care, and avoid truthfulness*. Under these circumstances, people pretend to have true relationships, but they are simply playing the hand they feel was dealt them. In an unfair game, no one plays fairly.

Can You "Handle" the Truth?

Telling the truth means finding a platform from which to tell it. Not everyone takes in information the same way. As managers, we need to be sensitive to how best to tell the truth. For example, if we are talking to the chief financial officer, we can easily run through the accounts. But if we need to talk about the numbers with someone not steeped in accounting disciplines, we may have to alter what we say, how we explain it, how quickly we can move through information, and so on. Our change in approach is not a manipulation. Instead, we are varying our approach because we understand that this person cannot understand the financial content we are communicating as eas-

ily as would an expert.

When it comes to truth telling within the organization, we want to be sensitive to how the person to whom we are talking takes in information, but we never want to soften the truth. We want to make the truth understandable, accessible, and comprehensive. We want to join with the person in an exploration of how the situation is, how it got to be that way, and how we can do better next time. As managers, we try to find ways to better communicate to those with whom we work. We are not in favor of abusing people by using the truth as an excuse to beat them up. We are in favor of telling people the unvarnished truth in ways that are accessible, kind, and supportive.

It is *not* supportive to distort reality just so people do not have to feel badly about situations they have managed. Of course, we feel badly when we do not succeed. But feeling badly comes with the territory of being a professional who is reaching to accomplish goals that are not always within one's means. It's appropriate to feel badly when the situation calls for it. Yet our motive for improving isn't simply to restore a feeling of equilibrium. Rather, it is because we want to do a better job, succeed for ourselves, the team, and the organization that we are willing to face the truth, feel whatever we feel, and figure out what we can learn to improve next time out.

The subject of truth, particularly within the organization, is enormously challenging. But it is also extraordinarily worthwhile, positive, and practical. Today, organizations are faced with sudden shifts in marketplace realities, migrating economics, and the lightning speed of globalization. The organizations that can deal with these changing realities have the best prospect of survival. Those organizations that cannot "handle the truth" will be left in the dust. Learning how to tell each other the truth, as hard a discipline as it is within the organization, will make all of the difference. ■

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Additional Resources by Robert Fritz

Corporate Tides: The Inescapable Laws of Organizational Structure (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996)

The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life (Ballantine Books, revised/expanded edition, 1989)

The Path of Least Resistance for Managers: Designing Organizations to Succeed (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999)

Your Life As Art (Newfane Press, 2002)

NEXT STEPS

Can your organization—and the people in it—handle the truth? If not, the following ways for encouraging truth telling, adapted from Charlotte Roberts’s article “Loyalty to the Truth” in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, may be useful:

- **Look for systemic blocks that prevent individuals from speaking out**, such as overt and covert punishments for telling the truth.
- **Provide context and training for the truth**. Employees can be overwhelmed if they aren’t prepared for a sudden shift to openness by top leaders.
- **When you can’t keep loyal to the letter of the truth, remain loyal to the spirit**. Sometimes managers can’t tell the whole truth, for example, in order to protect confidentiality. Still, they can present as much information as they can and avoid making misleading statements.
- **Set up a formal amnesty policy**. Create a formal policy ensuring that individuals won’t be blamed for surfacing systemwide problems. Establish an appeal process for people who feel they have been punished for stating the truth.

For more detail on each of these items, go to pages 213–215 in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Doubleday/Currency, 1994).