



Why and How to Drive the Political Correctness "Elephant" Out of Your Workplace

Note: "The elephant in the living room" is a common metaphor for situations in which people refuse to confront or even acknowledge a major issue even though everyone knows about it and it is causing serious problems.

Although it is good management practice to speak in a candid, forthright way about sensitive, difficult, or contentious issues in the workplace, many individuals struggle to do so. They may lack the necessary skills and/or feel uncomfortable using them. Instead, they revert to the "politically correct" indirect methods that are the norm in many organizations. As a result, we find ourselves with the proverbial elephant in the living room - or in this case, in the workplace.

There are many reasons why people engage in the indirect, "politically correct" approaches to problems. Do any of these explanations sound familiar to you?

- We feel uncomfortable dealing with emotions.
- We don't want to upset those who have some form of control over our careers or vital resources.
- We don't want to be "responsible" for a colleague's being called on the carpet for his/her shoddy work or lack of judgment.

How candid are the conversations in your workplace? Do people feel they can speak freely and honestly with each other, or do they fear real or imagined negative consequences, such as being labeled a troublemaker? Here are some of the ways that a lack of candor can hurt organizations. It can:

- Kill innovation and creativity.
- Shortchange employees by masking their actual performance.
- Create a toxic environment and a culture of mistrust and fear.
- Reward poor performance, causing productivity and morale to plunge.
- Foster a culture of mediocrity.

Conversely, here are some benefits of a culture in which candid conversations are the norm:

- Performance meets or exceeds standards and expectations.
- Morale is high because misunderstandings are addressed before they escalate.
- There is mutual trust among and between managers and employees.
- High performance is the norm; substandard performance is not tolerated.
- Constructive confrontation enables constant improvement.
- People make stronger, better thought-out decisions.

Here are four suggestions to help you banish the elephant from your workplace and create a healthy environment in which managers and employees regularly engage in productive, realistic, and candid conversations:

1. Teach people the skills needed to engage in honest, direct conversations. For example, show them how to:

- Engage in constructive confrontation – i.e., healthy, positive conversations that result in stronger, better thought-out decisions and outcomes.
- Focus on behaviors. This prevents people from addressing personality traits or characteristics, which are subjective and have nothing to do with performance. While you cannot change who people are, you can require them to adhere to behaviorally based performance standards and outcomes.
- Be direct and specific. When we are vague, we essentially give others permission to fill in the blanks about what they think we mean. Providing examples that illustrate your intended meaning helps people see it more clearly.
- Provide constructive feedback by offering actionable information – i.e., suggestions about behaviors and outcomes that people can control and change.
- Receive constructive feedback. Few things kill candid conversations as quickly as people who are unable or unwilling to recognize other's expertise and to listen to, and act on, their legitimate concerns.

2. Reward candid behavior. Recognize people who take the risk of raising an opposing concern or argument, regardless of whether they ultimately are right or wrong. Establish a culture in which legitimate questioning behavior is supported and actively encouraged.

3. Hold yourself, your managers, and your employees accountable for meeting the candid conversation expectation. People's actions generally are aligned with their self-interest. When there are consequences for being less than candid, people will change their behaviors.

4. Let people know the natural and imposed consequences of indirect, non-candid communications. Natural consequences are logical outcomes that follow a given behavior – e.g., people don't want to socialize with or help out a colleague whose habit of being late for work forces them to do his work in addition to their own.

What actions will you take today to begin to herd the political correctness "elephant" out of your workplace?

More about Dr. Pat Lynch

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