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# Truth Telling in Challenging Times and Challenging Situations

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# Telling the Truth in Organizations

By Jamie Notter

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As children in this country, we are all taught about the importance of telling the truth. George Washington, we are told, was so strong of character that after he made the mistake of chopping down his father's cherry tree, he took responsibility for his misdeed, proclaiming, "I cannot tell a lie..." as he confessed to his father. Ironically, I do have some questions about the veracity of this story, but I am happy to give our first President the benefit of the doubt, particularly because I stand behind the value that we are trying to teach through this story: telling the truth.

Then I grew up and started working in organizations, and I began to confront some rather unpleasant realities related to this national ideal of telling the truth. It seems that the lessons I had been taught about honesty and truth telling were not being universally applied in the work world. I started running into things like office politics, performance reviews, strategy sessions, and senior management team meetings where our national commitment to truth telling seemed conspicuously absent. As I extended my career into the association world I saw plenty of examples both on the staff side and the volunteer side where the truth was skirted, massaged, or ignored. Although arguably everybody knew the truth, collectively we could not face it or say it out loud.

Where did we go wrong? How could we start with such a clear value about telling the truth, yet end up with such a convoluted experience in organizations, where we frequently speak in half truths or simply walk away from important conversations because we do not feel comfortable enough to be truly honest?

I think the answer lies in our oversimplification and mythification of the concept of truth in organizations. If all we did in our associations was either cut down cherry trees or not cut down cherry trees, then our lesson from George Washington would serve us well. But we are faced with more complex challenges. We have bosses who might like some staff better than others. We have Board Presidents who might be spreading resources too thin with personal projects. We have employees with questionable performance. We have communities who see things differently than our leaders do. This kind of complexity requires a more nuanced understanding of what "truth" means and how we manage it.

In this article I will try to debunk some of the general myths we have about "the truth" that actually get in the way of our being more honest in organizations, and I suggest some alternative approaches that support more truth telling. I have identified three primary myths:

The truth is not about lying—it's about learning

The truth is not about objective proof—it's about subjective experience

The truth is not about individual integrity—it's about organizational culture

## Lying versus Learning

Our first mistake is defining truth in negative terms: to tell the truth is to "not lie." Not lying sets the bar far too low, and ultimately distracts us from what the truth can do for us in organizations. Getting through your organizational life without lying is kind of like saying your goal in life is to be "not dead," or your job performance objective is to be "not fired." In most organizations we tend to keep the bar this low by maintaining a focus on "not lying," so we end up settling for generalities, half-truths, platitudes and



other versions of organization-speak that spare us from outright lies. As long as our standard is George Washington's "not tell a lie," we leave too much room for half truth.

The antidote to this situation is deceptively simple: stop thinking about lying (or not lying) and start thinking about learning. What if, during important organizational conversations, you focused your attention on saying things and discussing things that would foster learning? What if learning was the standard? You would likely be more transparent. You would likely bring up different topics than are brought up now. You would ask more questions. The fact is, you can't learn much if you settle for generalities and half-truths.

I worked with an association client several years ago where a significant portion of the staff felt the CEO was biased—that she gave preferential treatment to some, but left others out in the cold. For months they danced around the subject. When I came in to work with them, I interviewed each staff and the CEO individually and every single person mentioned this issue—yet it had not been discussed at a group level at all.

No one was lying. Even better, several staff felt they weren't getting the truth from the CEO, but without a commitment to conversations focused on learning, all they ended up with was a large dose of griping behind the scenes. In this case it took an outside facilitator to break the stalemate, but it could easily have been broken if they had approached the conversation with learning in mind, because a learning focus will generate more curiosity. Curiosity leads to more honest questions about what was happening and what happened. Curiosity facilitates an openness to discovering new information—even information that may contradict what you previously believed. In short, curiosity leads to learning. In a more learning-focused conversation, this group was able to work through misperceptions based on specific events in the past and come to agreement about how they would work together moving forward.

## Objective Truth versus Subjective Experience

Unfortunately, our second myth around truth contributes very specifically to our inability to focus on learning. We tend to view truth as some kind of objective proof that will support an argument we are making. If we could just get the truth out on the table, this argument would be over, because our argument would be proven right. This is actually a derivative of a broader myth: that there is one, objective reality. There may be an objective reality, but unfortunately we are all human beings, and our human brains rely on our own senses to observe reality and our own histories to interpret it. By the time you or I are talking about reality, it is already subjective.

In our organizational lives, I have found that objective facts are only very rarely the key in solving problems. It's important to be aware of the objective facts, of course, but when we have really tough problems to solve (which is, after all, the most important work in our organizations), the solutions typically lie in the realm of subjective experience, rather than objective proof. Getting more truth into our conversations, then, is not about narrowing down to the singular truth, it is about opening up and exploring the subjective experiences of everyone involved.

In the CEO bias example, when the staff and the CEO finally began to talk about the issue, the conversation initially stalled, because once the aggrieved side was able to express their frustration with their perception of the CEO's bias, the CEO responded predictably with a denial: "but I'm not biased!" I asked the group to explore the issue without trying to prove the truth, but simply explaining how each side understood the situation. In the course of that conversation they identified some very specific instances where staff had drawn conclusions about bias, but the CEO saw something completely different. It even got down to whether or not she said goodbye to one staff person when she walked out of the office. In openly exploring these different, subjective experiences, they got more information out on the table, and they learned more about how everyone was thinking and what was important to them. That is truth. Better yet, that is truth that is in service of actually working more effectively together. The conversation shifted from whether the CEO was biased or not, to how are we going to move forward from here.



## Individual Integrity versus Organizational Culture

So part of what we need to do to allow more truth to be spoken in organizations is change the way we approach our conversations. If we focus more on learning and uncovering subjective experience, we will tend to see the levels of truth (particularly useful truth) rise in our organizations. The other shift we need to make, however, is away from a focus on individuals and towards a focus on the organization or system as a whole.

Our common perception about truth is that it is a matter of individual integrity. That is, the level of truth that you get from an individual is a function of his or her individual character. I've been around organizations long enough to know this is rarely the case. Individual integrity is a factor, obviously, but it is usually overshadowed by organizational culture. I have seen countless examples of people with very high integrity telling half-truths and avoiding reality simply because the organizational culture did not support it. David Riveness discusses this issue in his book, *The Secret Life of the Corporate Jester: A Fresh Perspective on Organizational Leadership, Culture and Behavior*. The royal "court jester" was always a character who was given the permission to tell the truth (though disguised a bit with humor), whereas the other royal advisors did not tell the truth to the monarch, simply because it was rarely in their interests to do so. They might get punished if they delivered bad news, and they had invested a lot in gaining these elite positions and weren't going to risk them by angering the monarch.

Are today's organizations any different? Lives and fortunes may not be as much on the line, but our organizational system of rewards and punishments (often unspoken systems) typically inhibit truth. Organizational cultures, for example, are typically conflict avoidant. When conflict is raised, people get uncomfortable, and everyone remembers when you got "flamed" by your colleague during that conflict conversation, so people collectively learn that it is best to keep conflict to oneself. Over time, raising conflict can become associated with "causing trouble" or not being a "team player," which typically will not get you on the promotion list. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we have been building organizational cultures that actually support and reward people for withholding information and not telling the whole truth. It doesn't matter if each individual is of high integrity. In the battle between individuals and culture, the culture always wins. If you want more truth being told in your organization, you will need to identify and change cultural patterns.

This is particularly true in the association world at the level of volunteer leaders. Some cultures will support more truth telling than others, but I think that in many associations you will find a reluctance among senior volunteer leaders to oppose each other. More specifically, if leaders are engaging in behavior that is detrimental to the organization's effectiveness, they are reluctant to confront each other with specific feedback about it. They are all respected leaders in their field, and they all put a lot of time and effort into making it to the Board, and I think it is sometimes deemed "disrespectful" to challenge each other with honest feedback.

But increasing the honesty in Board interactions is critical for an association's success. Boards typically have very little time to work through some very important conversations. They are together for only a small number of hours over the entire year, yet they are responsible for setting strategic direction. If they are unable to elevate the level of truth and honest feedback, they risk not meeting their objectives, as issues of strategy can rarely be truly resolved when speaking in half-truths. This is precisely why the "work" of the Board of Directors includes attention to cultural dynamics and communication patterns in addition to the content of governance.

## Conclusion: It's not About Leaders—It's about Leadership

Being honest has never been more important in organizations. Transparency is not only something to strive for these days, but given the power of the internet and social media, transparency is something that will be subjected upon us whether we are ready or not. And although we have a centuries-old tradition of demanding honesty from our highest leaders, it is time we started paying attention to the capacity to tell the truth at all levels of our organizations, not just those on top of the organizational chart. In addition to the three myths about the truth that I have mentioned in this article, I think we also subject ourselves to a myth about



leadership—that it is the exclusive domain of the small number of individuals who hold positions of authority. Leadership, in fact, is not a set of traits (like honesty) that individuals hold. Leadership is a broad capacity within an entire system to more effectively shape the future. And truth telling is a vital part of that capacity. So instead of holding our individual leaders accountable to a mythical standard about not telling a lie, perhaps we should start to hold our organizations accountable for creating a culture where telling the truth is more valued and supported.



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