

Getting the Unsaid Said

The Key to Collaboration, Innovation, and Growth

by Steven Gaffney

Have you ever thought, “If only they had told me what was really going on and what they wanted, I could have done something about it?” Or, “If I’d just had that necessary information or feedback, I could have made a much better decision?”

On the flipside, perhaps at times you have withheld opinions and ideas and thought to yourself, “Why bother sharing my opinion? What difference will it make?”

Working in the trenches with thousands of individuals from organizations of every size for almost fifteen years, I have discovered that the root cause of most organizational problems is the lack of honest, open communication. What I mean by a lack of honest, open communication is not only the truth versus lies aspect, but also the more subtle and sometimes more insidious aspect – the withholding of issues, information, opportunities, and ideas. When communication is stunted, it touches every aspect of organizational life. The key to collaboration, innovation, and growth is to get the unsaid said.

Problems That Result When Issues, Information, and Ideas Are Withheld

Take a moment to consider whether you’ve witnessed scenarios like these in your workplace:

Poor decisions are made because of incomplete or inaccurate information.

Contract problems develop because terms and language are not clarified, resulting in client upsets and eventual business loss.

Business and functional areas don’t collaborate, resulting in duplicate (and sometimes conflicting) endeavors. This lack of collaboration results in costly inefficiencies and ultimately thwarts business growth.

Meetings are unproductive because the real issues are not candidly discussed and sometimes the purpose of meetings is not even communicated.

E-mail prevents real conversations from occurring because people won’t talk to each other; instead of picking up the phone and talking through things, they hide behind e-mail, which can escalate conflicts.

Information is hoarded because people think knowledge is power.

Turnover is high because good employees are afraid to communicate honestly to get their issues resolved. The result is that real issues remain undiscovered and significant money must be invested to find, hire, and train new employees.

Organizational change is mismanaged, resulting in an ill-informed workforce and the development of—just in case I am not being told the truth contingency plans.

Innovation is stunted because people are not sharing all of their creative ideas. People may be afraid that their ideas will be ridiculed or that others will steal their ideas and take the credit.

These scenarios make it easy to see how the lack of honest, open communication affects virtually every aspect of our lives and negatively impacts collaboration, efficiencies, profitability, and business growth. Now let’s look at the solution – the ways to nurture honest, open communication, get the unsaid said, and positively impact the bottom line.

The Solution: Three Keys to Getting the Unsaid Said

Key 1. Telling the Truth about Lies and Withholding.

People are often unaware how greatly the lack of honest communication affects their everyday lives as well as the future of the organizations where they work. And, not everyone realizes just how much energy they’re using to hold things in.

According to a national study, 91 percent of people admit to lying on a regular basis. The truth is that all people lie or withhold information to some extent. It’s not because we’re all malicious or ethically flawed; it is primarily because we are afraid. We may be afraid of hurting someone’s feelings, or afraid of retribution, or afraid of permanently damaging a relationship, or afraid of a negative impact on our career. But when fear keeps people from sharing vital issues, information, and feedback, the whole organization suffers.

To make matters worse, many are unaware of the way they unknowingly encourage others not to be honest by getting defensive or upset when someone delivers bad news or unpleasant feedback. The underlying message of such negative reactions is, —Don’t tell the truth.

People can learn and change if they’re educated about the value of open, honest communication and provided with a safe environment that encourages it. It can also help to show people how good communication skills can positively affect their careers and help them win over difficult customers as well as new business. The good news is when people become aware of the pervasive effects of withholding information, they usually feel empowered to make the changes that fuel individual and organizational

success. These changes are contingent upon the consistent implementation of the next two keys.

Key 2. Implement the Law of Reflection.

The Law of Reflection says that whatever we give out, we tend to get back. As leaders, we need to model the behavior of honest, open communication. And we must use creative means to advocate the value of honesty and get the unsaid said. Just like an advertiser repeats the same message in different ways, we must —advertise the value of honesty.

We also need to consistently demonstrate it through full disclosure and transparent actions — even in difficult times. The management at one company I know of was reluctant to tell the truth about impending layoffs for fear of losing good employees. When the organization finally did announce the layoffs, the good employees lost their trust in management. As a result, they eventually left. Lack of transparency really does come with a cost.

To implement the Law of Reflection we need to leave our own offices and talk with people throughout the organization — go fishing for honest feedback and ideas. If we wait, we might only hear about it when it's too late. When we get feedback, we need to reward it. It's easy to talk the talk about honest communication, but it's no use if we turn around and punish the first messenger who gives honest feedback.

By implementing the Law of Reflection and modeling the behaviors of the honest communication that we're seeking, we can inspire others to do the same. As leaders we must be accountable for living out the message that we're advertising.

Key 3. Stock the Toolbox – Notice vs. Imagine.

People need the systems, methods, and strategies to get the unsaid said in a timely and effective manner. Furthermore, people must not only see the importance of bringing up an issue, they must learn how to influence others to get the issue resolved. Most problems start small. That's why it's so important to implement systems that encourage consistent communication and feedback.

Right now, someone in your workplace knows about a small problem. Will that information get communicated? Simple systems and strategies are needed to get that information where it needs to go. One helpful system is simply to educate people about the way to share difficult information. Fear can be a powerful hindrance, but knowledge is even more powerful. There are simple steps people can follow that will help them have those difficult conversations they would prefer to avoid.

One strategy that I like to use to get people and departments talking is to have them discuss what they "noticed" and what they've "imagined." I believe one of the top problems in the workplace is the failure to distinguish the facts of a situation (what can be "noticed") from opinions, thoughts, evaluations, and conclusions (what is

"imagined"). Many times people operate as if their opinions are facts and make decisions accordingly. People often don't realize how incorrect their interpretations are, and then the misdiagnosis becomes even more exacerbated when the people they are interacting with have different agendas, goals, needs, and backgrounds.

Consider a few classic examples. Do people in your organization believe they know what their customers want rather than checking in and listening to uncover what the customer really wants and needs? Have you ever seen a project go awry because it was based on assumptions rather than facts and data points?

Honest, open communication is the antidote to troublesome situations. Providing the proper systems, methods, and strategies for facilitating communication across your organization will dramatically increase collaboration, reward innovation, and ultimately win new business.

The Immediate Challenge

Honesty takes strategy, skill, and practice. Imagine a person going to the gym once and then declaring, "Now I am healthy." People often say and do things once and expect immediate change. In reality, we must constantly work at change and create an environment where the people around us are inspired to change as well. Perfection is hard, but progress is easy. When we make progress, the benefits can be enormous.

Just imagine if everyone around you talked more openly and shared ideas and wisdom with each other. Organizations would become more innovative, teamwork and collaboration would dramatically improve, and revenue goals could be exceeded.

Here is the challenge: What progress can you make today? How can you discover what ideas and other feedback are being withheld in your organization?

One action you can take is to ask the important people in your life to read this article. Then make time to discuss it and develop a plan to move forward. ***The way to change your future and your organization's future is by making changes today.***

Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, influence and leadership and is one of the recognized authorities on the subject of honesty. He is the author of two ground-breaking books, Just Be Honest: Authentic Communication Strategies that Get Results and Last a Lifetime and Honesty Works! Real-World Solutions to Common Problems at Work and Home.

This article is the property of the Steven Gaffney Company. Please email info@stevengaffney.com or call 703-241-7796 for permission to reprint this article in any format. Copyright 2010, www.StevenGaffney.com.