

Aggressive Listening: The Key to Employee Warnings

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Abstract

Given the possibilities for organizational disasters, managers need a new perspective on how to elicit employee concerns. Far more effective than suggestion boxes, aggressive listening requires managers to meet with their subordinates to ask about any possible threats to the organization. Then, of course, a system must be in place to route each such concern to an individual able to act on it, as well as to provide for follow-up and communication back to the relevant employee(s). An effort of this kind, the authors say, has value beyond the warnings obtained: it demonstrates managerial humility and empowers employees.

Introduction

Let's start with the common organizational truism: anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Recent examples range from Target stores unable to process transactions the day before Father's Day, to the fire-related lawsuits and rolling blackouts crushing the finances and reputation of Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), to the fatal crashes of two Boeing Max 737 planes within five months of each other. Will managers in your company hear quickly from their employees about potential problems, even those as critical as these three examples? Any answer indicating less than positive certainty justifies our perspective: we are advocating an organizational climate that encourages employees to pass along what they perceive to be potentially bad news concerning any facet of your organization.

Did some employee(s) know in the Target, PG&E, or Boeing cases -- and the many others that have been less well-publicized -- that something might

be wrong? Any manager is wise to consider in his or her own organization the likelihood (1) that an employee will suspect or discover a possible problem, but say nothing to management, and/or (2) that management will fail to actively work at eliciting even the faintest concerns, let alone welcome them, and/or (3) that even when an employee alludes even indirectly to some concern about a threat to the organization's success, management will appear deaf to that concern. We offer an alternative: a set of actions we characterize as aggressive listening.

For Some Managers, a New Role

Management has historically involved planning, organizing, and "controlling" in the sense of measuring whether results met the plan.¹ Possibly its best-known variant is Peter Drucker's emphasis on knowledge workers, wherein managers take into account the importance of skillful professionals in the planning/organizing/control process. Specifically, those managers were taught to respect the skills and judgment of these individuals in their workforce and to adapt managerial processes to provide incentives to stay with the organization and be productive.²

Certainly, parts of those management processes involve listening. However, the usual pattern has managers listening to comments by knowledge workers concerning some plan and how to implement it. Could the work be handled more efficiently? Could it become more customer-friendly? In scenarios of this kind, nothing in the conversations between managers and knowledge workers includes questions from managers about whether the organization is vulnerable to or even headed for a dramatic, possibly life-threatening stumble.

Were information technology professionals at Target asked on a regular basis whether their systems could go down, all at once, in every store, on a weekend? Were PG&E infrastructure experts asked how to prevent a recurrence of the catastrophic 2018 wildfires without leaving 700,000 households and businesses without power?³ Were Boeing engineers and test pilots asked if it was even possible that two 737 Max planes would crash within a period of five months and thereby kill a total of 346 people?⁴

Research Supporting Aggressive Listening

This whole approach has considerable theoretical backing. Its implementation demonstrates three outcomes that studies have shown to be healthy for managers and their organizations. First, managers really learn from subordinates, who thereby understand that the organization values their insights. Second, managers experience the value of demonstrating humility; they are asking to be told what they don't know. Finally, as a third

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benefit, subordinates feel responsibility for outcomes by the organization, even or especially when those outcomes are negative. We will discuss each of these favorable factors in turn.

The first positive outcome is the managerial learning that can come about from the process we describe as aggressive listening. When managers are open to or proactively seek feedback from subordinates, the performance of those managers is likely to improve, according to researchers.⁵ Such research builds on earlier work in this area, which examined the effectiveness of managers as perceived by their subordinates. This earlier work concluded that in the eyes of those subordinates, perceived effectiveness especially improves when their managers are open to or proactively seek negative feedback rather than exclusively positive feedback⁶ – which is of course what we are advocating here.

Admittedly, some managers hesitate to seek advice from others, even when they need it, because they fear being perceived as dependent and incompetent, or they fear they may be surrendering some degree of power to the person they are petitioning for help or advice. However, asking someone for advice may enhance that person's perceptions of the seeker's competence, especially if that person seeking advice is an expert and the task is difficult.⁷

Furthermore, asking others for a critique of one's own performance can seem downright appealing to those who are consulted on that topic. One well-known example appears in Exhibit 1: Ed Koch, the three-term mayor of New York City, went around the city of 8 million with a question that identified to anyone he encountered his priority for what it took to be good at the job: feedback. He asked over and over: "How'm I doin'?"⁸

Exhibit 1: Asking 8 million people "How'm I doin'?"

As a three-term mayor of New York City, Ed Koch could have been well known for any phrase that he might have chosen to repeat so often that it became associated with him. Instead, he chose a question: How'm I doin'?

Looking back over the history not only of prominent political figures but also of industry leaders in the United States and elsewhere, it is difficult to associate any other individual with what Koch took as his identity: asking a question. He described himself as a Bronx-born New Yorker, hardly an image associated with insecurity. Consequently, it is challenging to infer timidity or indecisiveness from his choice. Instead of instructing the residents of his city, he chose to ask a question – and a question that allowed him to make clear that he was open to negative as well as positive answers.

The second benefit that aggressive listening demonstrates is precisely the managerial humility that can seem daunting to managers but reassuring to those they manage. Admittedly, scheduling individual sessions to absorb feedback may represent a psychological or social cost for a manager, and anticipation of those costs may deter implementing programs like the one described here. As someone asking to be told something he or she does not know – or to be told about more than one such issue – an individual leaves behind the usual managerial role of the expert. Fortunately, leader humility may positively affect team performance⁹ and likewise may enhance follower psychological empowerment,¹⁰ perspectives which lead directly to our next point.

The third benefit when a leader has made appointments and then come to the office of each of his or her employees simply to listen is that each of those employees can feel empowered. Employees take greater ownership of results when they have the opportunity to contribute advice, warnings, or even a report detailing the likelihood of catastrophe. When employees are asked to participate in decision-making and can act with autonomy, they ultimately may experience greater empowerment and psychological ownership of their jobs as well as psychological ownership of the greater organization.¹¹ In turn, according to recent research, empowerment and psychological ownership are associated with many employee attitudes and behaviors that any organization would want to encourage, including organizational commitment, job satisfaction, work engagement, employee voice, and helping behaviors.¹²

Given the greater odds of finding out in advance about threats, however, the largest benefit accrues to the organization as a whole. When the approach described here works at its best, employees become confidently willing to speak out about anything they think may imperil the organization, its customers, or its employees, knowing that managers will listen to them and that they will not endure sanctions for voicing unpleasant truths. Yes, such common techniques as anonymous email capabilities, ombudsmen, suggestion boxes, and even notices on bulletin boards may communicate the message that warnings and alerts are welcome. However, aggressive listening communicates something far stronger – that offering warnings and alerts from employees to management are part of the job.

Organizational Responses to What Aggressive Listening Elicits

In addition, when aggressive listening is handled wisely, its implementation communicates to employees that speaking up will lead to results for the success of the organization. Therefore, every organization considering an effort of the kind we describe here needs to establish a system

for ensuring that words lead to helpful actions. Here again, the organizational response takes the form of a two-step process. Once warnings or alerts are offered, employees “learn” that frank criticism is both useful and appreciated, and that signal is initially provided when the manager’s response to criticism or concerns is “Thanks! – I really appreciate your alerting me about that.”

However, that short-term reward to the employee is just the beginning. The longer-term payoff, for the employee and the organization, stems from the recognition that there are two primary reasons employees may fail to speak up -- and then taking steps to neutralize those issues. First, employees may perceive that efforts to speak up are futile because they believe that managers are unlikely to listen to and unlikely to do anything about their comments. Second, employees may perceive that such efforts are precarious, potentially resulting in negative repercussions for them. Thus, as noted by Morrison, employees are more inclined to speak up if they are confident that their comments will make a difference and are unlikely to lead to undesired outcomes.¹³

The first point, that negative comments will substantively help the organization, falls to managers to make clear. Once an employee has been thanked, the next step is to iterate one level higher in the organization exactly the experience the employee went through: understanding that the knowledge that something may be wrong creates an obligation to speak up about it. At the same time, a manager in such a situation should make clear to the employee with the original qualm what will happen next – but also what will not happen: negative consequences for someone who has pointed out even a concern or suspicion, let alone a worrisome fact. Both the knowledge that bad news will be passed along reliably and quickly and the knowledge that the organizational response is appreciation, not punishment, are requisites for the approach recommended here.

What to Do with Bad News

Of course, it is not sufficient to offer the general statement that warnings should be quickly passed up the organizational structure. Certainly, top management in any company benefits from hearing sooner rather than later about potential problems. The challenge for anyone with knowledge of those potential problems is how to get the information to those in a position to act on it.

According to *The New York Times*, a pilot working on the ill-fated 737 Max jet “had raised concerns about the system to a colleague” in 2016, more than two years before the two deadly crashes that grounded the plane.¹⁴ With 20/20 hindsight, it is easy to say that the pilot’s assignment should have been to test the plane AND to report any doubts, concerns, or even questions to

_____ by a date agreed on by the pilot and whoever communicated his assignment to him. At the same time, whatever individual's name filled in the blank of who should be told would in turn, ideally, have an individual specified to whom he or she would report potential concerns, with considerable thought given to whose name filled each of those blanks. The wisest criterion for choice? Who would have the responsibility to act on the information if that individual knew about it?

Realistically, the nature of a concern may dictate the choice of who should be told about it, requiring an alternative path to reporting upward. However, the larger point is that telling any employee at any level to whom to pass along concerns, in what time frame, conveys a worthwhile set of messages. Such communication makes clear that management is open to potentially bad news. It makes clear that management will not be blind-sided or resentful if in fact bad news is forthcoming. And most importantly, it makes clear that -- if warranted -- giving management bad news is part of your job.

A second potential benefit of a predictable and efficient procedure for moving warnings and alerts to those in a position to act is based on the obvious possibility that such a warning or alert is simply unwarranted. Clearly, organizations may be too ready to dismiss what they simply hope will be qualms that have no basis in reality. But a thorough investigation, ideally involving a third party with no stake in the outcome, may in fact result in the conclusion that the facts refute the concern. In that circumstance, the manager who heard the original qualm and certainly the individual who expressed it should see whatever report indicates that all is well.

The counter-argument of "the less said the better" about a problem that turns out not be a problem is one that is easy to reject. It seems unlikely that the organization is well served by having at least one employee and one manager who believe that a concern has been ignored. These individuals -- who may well have shared their worries with others -- need to know exactly what was done to investigate a concern, what was concluded -- and then be assured that the organization would much prefer to have warnings that turn out to be erroneous rather than no warnings of outcomes that turn out to be problems ranging from painful to cataclysmic.

Protecting the Source of Potential Bad News

The second concern that may keep an employee from passing along concerns relevant to a company's plans or activities is the anticipation of negative personal consequences. It is easy to say that passing on qualms concerning company plans or actions should be explicitly part of one's job. However, it is no one's favorite aspect of the job. In essence, employees are being asked to tell some representative of management that they,

management, are possibly inadequate or uninformed in some respect. Furthermore, a subordinate has become aware of this possible inadequacy in a context in which those in charge are still unaware. Why would an employee – or for that matter, a manager considering passing on a qualm to those further up in the organizational structure – want to convey such a negative message?

“Employee voice” is one way to view the issue here: the “informal, discretionary, and upward communication by an employee of ideas, solutions, or concerns about work-related problems.”¹⁵ One 2018 example of its absence, based on the reluctance we have identified to tell managers about their possible inadequacies, is the unwillingness of any staff member or other person to alert President Donald Trump to the fact that he was being filmed by reporters dragging a lengthy piece of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoe as he ascended the stairs of Air Force One.¹⁶

Note that employees do have discretion about whether to pass along bad news. It is easy for someone to conclude that he or she will be looked down on as a nuisance, or even fired for pointing out risks – and so simply do nothing. Such concerns have led to the passage of “whistleblower” laws, which are briefly reviewed in Exhibit 2. While many employees may be unfamiliar with the contents of such laws, it is reasonable to assume that most know they exist and, importantly, that they represent a societal consensus that it should be safe to report negative news or even present or future negative possibilities.

Some companies go so far as to develop their own policies protecting whistleblowers from retaliation, and research indicates that companies benefit when they enact such policies and their employees feel safe in abiding by them.¹⁷ A possible rationale for such policies is that internal whistleblowing can be a key mechanism for preventing public or external whistleblowing, which can negatively affect a firm’s image and may also increase the number of lawsuits -- and settlement amounts -- that a firm faces.¹⁸

In other words, companies may benefit by actively encouraging employees to utilize internal whistleblowing policies.¹⁹ However, we see such policies as vastly inadequate for learning early enough to take action what qualms employees may have and then for making it not only comfortable but expected for them to pass along those concerns. Whistleblower policies appear to tell an employee that he or she is protected, and in a legal sense, they do so. However, a large gulf exists between relying on such policies and the far more proactive approach of creating a climate for bad news to be passed on readily and in the belief that candor will be rewarded.

Exhibit 2: Protecting Whistleblowers

Whistleblower laws are intended to protect employees from retaliation for reporting (alleged) violations of federal and state laws regarding a host of industries and policy areas, including, but not limited to, workplace safety and health, public health and safety, securities laws (i.e., financial waste and fraud), food safety, environmental protection, censorship of scientific research, mismanagement, and abuses of authority. The prohibited retaliation against employees can take several forms, such as firing or laying off, demoting, threatening, withholding benefits, or otherwise punishing them.

Whistleblower protection programs may exist for employees of private sector organizations as well as governments, depending on the applicable act or regulation. For instance, OSHA enforces more than 20 acts or regulations (e.g., Sarbanes-Oxley Act, Consumer Financial Protection Act, Clean Air Act, etc.) for which whistleblower protections are afforded to various individuals.

Asking Threatening Questions

It appears pertinent at this point to envision a “listening” scene like the one we advocate when a manager actively seeks potentially negative information. Picture a manager asking direct reports what concerns they might have about the organization, or any aspect of it, or any facet of the plans or actions of the manager himself or herself, who is right there asking the question.

Social science researchers are well aware of how many ways someone can avoid answering a question. Words will indeed come out of the mouth of someone asked what he or she is uncomfortable answering, but those words may be irrelevant, overly general, sugar-coated, or deliberately incomplete. Consequently, considerable research has been devoted to how to ask threatening questions in a way that will elicit accurate and useful answers.

The consensus of such research centers on the importance of what the questioner says to introduce a question, an insight similar to the suggestion that what someone seeking to persuade offers as context before delivering a persuasive message greatly influences the outcome.²⁰ The goal is to make it comfortable for someone to violate the norms of organizational life that discourage negativity, discourage “sticking your neck out,” and certainly discourage speaking with concern about any actions contemplated or taken by those above one’s own place in the organizational hierarchy.²¹

Therefore, one approach is to make the introduction to a threatening question a long one,²² and our own experience leads to the recommendation that the introduction be serious, and consist of no questions, only of statements. As an example:

Pat, I really appreciate the chance to listen to what you have to say. I'm guessing it's not the most comfortable feeling in the world to have your team leader ask you where the organization is vulnerable to doing something wrong – or failing to do something that we should be paying attention to. But that's exactly what I want you to think about, systematically, and then to let me know where we might be in real difficulty. And at the same time, I'm asking you to think about what I am doing or failing to do that should be handled better.

I understand that it's tempting to just offer some general statement that everything is fine, or nothing comes to mind, or whatever. But that's how we end up in trouble with our customers or regulators or stockholders or all three. And none of us can afford that. So, this isn't a matter of hoping that somebody else will bring up what worries you so that you don't have to bring it up. This is a matter of doing a part of your job that could matter a lot – telling me what where or how we could be getting ourselves into trouble.

As noted earlier, any issue raised by an employee should lead to a sincere thanks and a plan to let the employee know how the issue was handled. First, though, a questioner needs to probe to be sure that the issue is correctly interpreted. Then, if an employee has responded about one potential problem, there is no reason to assume that only one issue exists. The follow-up from the manager asking the questions needs to be “and what else comes to mind?”

Experienced interviewers also know one last way to elicit information. The manager asking questions gets up to leave; clearly the session is over. Informally, though, there is one final question: “You know, sometimes people think of something at the last minute that really might matter. Is there something you've been thinking about that we missed?”

What About Small Businesses?

The questioning process can be the same regardless of the size of a business. However, two factors suggest that aggressive listening in a small business setting has different challenges than would be the case in a larger organization.

One factor is the likelihood that the CEO, or quite possibly the founder/CEO, is responsible for a plan or decision that creates concern for an employee who is asked about such concerns. In such situations, of course, the employee is more reluctant to speak up. The second factor, working in the opposite direction to make aggressive listening effective, is that problems

identified through such listening can be handled more quickly and effectively when the challenge of penetrating layers of management to find a solution does not exist – because the business may be so small that there simply are not layers of management.

The challenge of expecting employees to express qualms about ideas they may associate with the CEO is, however, a discouraging factor for eliciting warnings. Consequently, while top management support is, of course, necessary in an organization of any size for an effort like the one we describe here, it is truly vital in a small organization.

Furthermore, that support will need to be more vivid and convincing than would otherwise be the case. In a large company, it is possible to imagine an electronic communication channel letting all employees in the organization know about the introduction of a program of this kind, with details to be provided by department heads or one's immediate supervisor, depending on how face-to-face communication is usually handled within the organization. However, in a small business, there would seem to be no substitute for an all-employee meeting or set of meetings at which the CEO looks the audience in the eye to explain what will take place and why. Then the most important communication to those employees is to issue a sincere request: "Please tell the person assigned to ask you what we are doing that puts this business at risk exactly what you think. Please do that for all of us! The jobs of everybody in this room depend on our avoiding disaster."

Anticipating What Employees Might Say

At least one caution comes to mind on this topic. Any manager might sensibly ask herself or himself: How much do I really want to know?

The techniques we have outlined here can certainly leave a manager with the unpleasant realization that ideas he or she has championed have flaws that are clear to at least one employee. We suggest considering such vulnerabilities as the first step in this process and fixing those flaws, if it is possible to do so, before starting the kind of listening we advocate. Anyone who is thinking of asking direct reports, or team members, to identify deficiencies of any kind will benefit from first thinking of what they are likely to say if they are truthful.

Then it will be wise not only to fix what can be fixed but to let employees know that the improvements came about "because I spent some time thinking about what you would tell me is worrying you." This kind of approach communicates that the manager does not imagine that he or she is perfect, also believes that employees are astute enough to notice, and certainly that the next step the manager plans to undertake is to learn more.

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How will that learning take place? One way is undoubtedly what we outline here: aggressive listening.

Of course, the devil is still in the details. We draw on our own consulting experience as well as the research cited here to offer a set of suggestions for implementing our message: that managers have to work at getting feedback on potential disasters – and they should. Here are some tips to make it happen.

- ✓ Get out of your office, so you meet people where they work, not just in your office or other areas that support the power differential between you. Employees are franker where they are comfortable, and they may be more likely to recall and communicate relevant issues in the physical areas in which they experience those issues.
- ✓ Consider the fact that you are asking for behavior that violates ordinary organizational norms. That behavior may be more comfortable for an employee in a context in which he or she is already violating other ordinary organizational norms. If the employee smokes, for example, it might be wise to have your discussion outside the building, so that it can become a cigarette break.
- ✓ Leave your ego at the door. If you are not up to speed on a technological issue, do whatever research is required, and ask for whatever help you need. Your embarrassment in admitting a lack of sophistication with some technological subtlety is nothing compared to what neglect of a warning can bring about.
- ✓ Also, sweat the small stuff (just a bit). A minor issue can escalate from an annoyance to a cost-eater, a slowdown, or worse. Ask employees periodically about factors that are simply annoyances before they become more than that. If a co-worker leaves half-eaten candy in an open trash container where your customers will encounter the rats that are attracted, you want to know about it.
- ✓ More is required than setting up a system to receive and act on indications from employees that something may be wrong. Ideally, that process creates a climate in which employees speak out about their concerns without being asked. Therefore, the same degree of responsiveness is essential when employees spontaneously pass along possible concerns. They are entitled to be thanked and then told how the qualms they have passed along will be communicated to someone who can use them to make a substantive difference.

Overall, the first step is the hardest. For managers who have been telling, instructing, and coaching, it is clearly a challenge to say, “I’m going to be an

aggressive listener.” But failing to do so may, depending on circumstances, risk a plane crash, a bankruptcy – or a lost opportunity. By contrast, what are the upsides of aggressive listening? We encourage you to find out.

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