

A Culture of Fear.....and the Antidote

Every day in workplaces — from the Fortune 50 to NGOs, from non-profits to mom and pop ventures — folks at work are living in fear — fear of losing their jobs, fear of being judged and criticized, fear of being disliked, fear of being embarrassed, fear of being ostracized, or fear of facing uncomfortable challenges or problems.

Every day in workplaces, folks experience inappropriate and egregious behaviors — deceit, fraud, harassment (verbal, sexual, physical, etc.), gossiping, bullying, lying, cheating and stealing.

Curiously, many of our workplaces openly exhort employees to abide by their organizational values, pointing to honesty and integrity, trust and openness.

The “dirty little secret” (perhaps not so little), however, is many of our workplaces are challenged when it comes to being honest with themselves.

The issue around inappropriate and egregious behaviors is not so much that they exist, but that so many choose to turn a blind eye to them — because they are afraid. They live life at work in a culture of fear.

The problem

The problem is most of us have learned to keep our fear to ourselves. We are reluctant to expose bad news to our boss, to say we screwed up and made a mistake, to ask a colleague to stop bullying or harassing us, to disclose the company is keeping two sets of books, to admit to overpaying underperforming leaders and managers, to point out where there is cheating, fraud and deceit, to expose failed processes, systems and to admit to defective products. Fear resounds, but often very subtly.

These fearful folks live life at work in denial, defensiveness and delusion — repressing, suppressing and stuffing their fear — working in a world of make-believe that all is well. They often shore themselves up with a sense of grandiosity, living the “appearance” of well-being, exuding a false persona that communicates all is well, pretending nothing is amiss. Magical thinking.

The solution

The solution to fear begins with appreciation. Appreciation means admitting our fears and owning them. Appreciation includes exploring our reluctance and our self-imposed silence that keeps us from speaking up and out — exploring, consciously and deeply, the low-grade-fever type of anxiety and agitation we feel when we keep our fears tamped down, hidden.

Even in the midst of the intensity and the daily grind of our everyday workplace, we know the silence of fear. It’s always there, lurking just below the surface. In team meetings, in one-on-one meetings, when engaging with clients and customers, direct reports and bosses, even in social situations — all the while we are in conversation and dialogue — we know the silence of fear.

We feel the tension in our shoulders and the queasiness in our stomachs. We feel the constriction in our throats, and sense the tightness in our chest. We feel quiet, passive, withdrawn and deferential. We don’t make eye contact. We are silently angry. We feel embarrassed, cowardly, passive and reluctant. We’re there, but we’re not. We hold a large part of our self back.

The good news is that we are experiencing our fear and it’s very supportive to notice it. It’s helpful to notice where we are at any given moment on the continuum between fear and hope — hope that our life at work will be different. It’s helpful and healing to experience an awareness of our internal conflict between being open, honest and authentic, and being shut down in order to survive in our life at work, to

save our self, our reputation, or our paycheck. Awareness is the first powerful step to change. Now that I notice my fear, then what?

Being myself

The opposite of being fearful is being courageous. Being courageous is not about "not having fear". Being courageous is about showing up, authentically, in integrity in spite of our fear trusting that we can access an internal sense of "right knowing", "right understanding" and engage in "right action" and then do-ing our best, and be-ing our best for our own sake and the sake of our organization, team, or unit.

Fear has no purpose. There is no "upside" to being afraid. From a place of authenticity and integrity we can acknowledge there's no sense in being fearful. Being authentic means to forward the action of our life in spite of fear and that by acknowledging we are afraid, we can be present to our experience, allow what we are feeling, breathe deeply and intentionally, sense "inside" and activate and generate the energy of courage, will and strength to "show up."

Living and engaging in life, in life at work, beyond the silence of fear allows us to look at ourselves and see how we deny our fear by going silent. (Remember that when we try to bury our feelings, we bury them "alive.") When we admit our fear, and be open to it, the shackles of fear are loosened. We become free when we openly speak out about our fears, and allow others to speak about theirs. The truth does set you free.

When we hear others talk about their fears of being fired, or reprimanded or denigrated for saying or doing something, we need to compassionately listen to them and create a container of safety to support their disclosing. Critical to shedding our fears, and acting courageously, is admitting to the discomfort that fear causes us.

Self-awareness with respect to "who we are" and "how we are" in the workplace helps to create a workplace climate and culture that is not fear-based. Being open to feedback and constructive criticism (by and from all those with whom we work – above us, below us, next to us), listening empathically, actively and deeply, cooperating with colleagues, respecting others' privacy and individuality, discussing difficult issues from a heart-felt place, and acknowledging that many, many others, in addition to ourselves, are steeped in fear in their day-to-day life at work, are ways we create a safe, open and honest workplace environment.

Each one of us is worthy to be free from fear at work. Being free from fear at work starts with you.

So, our questions for self-reflection are:

- Who or what causes you to experience fear at work, to not speak up or speak out?
- Can you acknowledge your fears? Can you give yourself permission to feel afraid?
- When was the last time you spoke up or out against an inappropriate workplace action or behavior?
- Do you ever confide in others about your workplace fears? Do others confide in you?
- Are you open to admitting your mistakes?
- What is your organization's culture around making mistakes?
- Are you afraid to give or receive "bad news?"
- Are you afraid of being criticized, embarrassed, or disliked?
- Are you afraid of confronting a serious workplace issue or challenge?
- Do you attempt to mask your workplace fears? How so? Does it work? Really, really work?
- Do you generally have the courage to speak up in spite of feeling fearful?
- Do you feel authentic at work?
- Is the silence of fear peaceful and quiet (internally) for you? Honestly?

- What one or two baby steps could you take to act courageously in spite of your fear, to step beyond the silence of fear?

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