

Vacuums Are Good for Cleaning Rugs, Not for Leading Companies

The word “vacuum” is from the Latin for “empty.” Vacuums create suction and clean carpets. Scientists find all sorts of uses for vacuums, such as the one in a light bulb to protect the filament. Why do leaders sometimes think a vacuum of information (meaning little or none) is a good way to lead people, encourage good work and produce results?

THE PROBLEM:

When management creates an information vacuum, something will fill it. Just like the dirt attracted to that Hoover, misinformation and speculation will swirl around on its way into the vortex of your employees’ minds. And just like the dirt in the Hoover, it is likely unattractive and odorful. In almost every case, the real information we purposefully or neglectfully withheld is much more useful and positive than the destructive misinformation attracted by that vacuum.

8

MY PREDICTION:

One of the key expectations employees have of their leaders is that they will be a source of truthful and useful information. The most important category of information for employees is “How does this affect me?” Consider these examples:

- A key employee just resigned. Sally’s workload may double for a period of time. Or, maybe Sally would like to be considered for that role. What is Sally thinking after three weeks of “no word” from management on its plans? What is management thinking? What is the chance they are thinking the same thing as Sally?
- A major customer just left, or a new one was just won. Is that bad or good? For who? Depends on where you sit and what you do for the company. The management team may see it very differently than the people who deliver the goods or services.
- We cut costs last year and delayed pay raises. Things “seem” better this year. Are we going back to our old pattern, or are we in a waiting mode? For how long? Ask five employees and you will get five opinions.
- We see consultants and strangers all around here (or trainers, or auditors, or new faces). Are we being bought, sold, acquired, assessed for a big loan, assessed for retention or layoff? What?
- A significant event happened for all to see or hear (or maybe there’s been a harassment allegation or other poor behavior) and management has “gone dark.” Everyone is expecting to see a resolution in some fashion. Does management care? Are they afraid or unprepared to act? What else will they tolerate?



HOW TO PREPARE:

Tips to prevent unintended vacuums and to resist the urge to create them:

1. Encourage and reward managers (especially HR) for bringing the “view from the floor” to your team. Some things may seem silly to you but are major to others.
2. Use employee surveys conducted by a third party to encourage candor and honest comments. Amazing things will be uncovered and resolved!
3. Consider the information needs of the average employee when any major decision, important event or scary issue arises. If management is concerned enough to expend time and sweat, chances are employees care too (maybe for different reasons).
4. Establish a culture of good and timely information with channels to publicize important news and results. Make these issues acceptable topics of conversation and inquiry. Create an “It’s okay to ask” culture.
5. Resist the temptation to believe they cannot handle the truth, they do not want to know the truth or the truth will be used as a sword against you one day. Sure, there are common sense exceptions to this and timing may be everything. Generally speaking, more is better when the “How does it affect me?” factor is high.

Are there situations when saying nothing is better than saying something? Yes, when you are contractually bound to silence for a short period and when the news is so bad or complex you must have time to form a response. And there are many times when some of the information should be withheld or tailored to its audience (TMI, right?). Bottom line: I encourage you to think of information as an important tool in your bag for creating a healthy culture, engaged staff and productive workplace.

Contact me directly if I can help you or your team.

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