learning edge

FLIGHT RECORDER DO NOT OPEN

Why don't we speak "up"?

Whether in the cockpit or the conference room, study after study shows that people are reluctant to share reservations, concerns, or candid views with their boss. What are they afraid of?

Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School calls this inhibited upward flow of information in organizations an absence of "upward voice." She says two kinds of factors inhibit people's willingness to speak their mind:

✓ **Individual differences** - personality factors like extroversion or proactivity, communication skillfulness, and personal concerns about repercussions and job security.

✓ **Contextual differences** - cues about the reaction you'll get, such as leader behavior, the degree of hierarchy in the organization, and explicit channels for information, such as suggestion boxes, surveys, or regular meetings.

ARE HIGH ACHIEVERS PARTICULARLY AT RISK?

Our observation is that high achievers are particularly reluctant to speak up. They say they fear not being seen as a team player, or the "can do" star they are used to being.

These are your smartest and most capable colleagues. Can your organization afford their silence?

Soft Skills, Hard Science, Real Results

This is Your Captain Speaking: The Challenge of Speaking "Up"

by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

CASE STUDY 116

On commercial airline flights, pilots and co-pilots split the flying duties equally. Yet historically, crashes are much more likely to happen when the captain is in the flying seat.

Why? Studies of cockpit voice recordings of crew conversations reveal that it is the direct result of co-pilots' reluctance to speak up clearly to alert the captain to a problem.

The bottom line? Your plane is safer when the less experienced pilot is flying, because the second pilot is not going to be afraid to speak up.

Hint, Hint.

On January 13, 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from Washington's National Airport in a heavy snowstorm. Minutes later it plunged into the 14th Street Bridge and the Potomac River. 70 out of 74 passengers, 4 out of 5 crew members, and 4 motorists on the bridge died.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the crash was a direct result of failed communication between the captain and first officer. Specifically, a failure of the first officer to speak up clearly, and a failure of the captain to pay attention to, information about ice build-up on the wings.

The crew of Flight 90 is not unusual. Judith Oresanu and Ute Fischer are researchers at NASA who study crew communication and decision-making. Oresanu and Fischer identify six ways that pilots or co-pilots could speak up to alert the other to a problem. They range from the most direct and clear (a command), to middle ground like a suggestion ("let's....") or a query ("What would you like to do about...?), to the most indirect and least clear, which they call a hint.

A hint sounds exactly like the co-pilot's attempts to raise the icy build-up on the

wings of Flight 90, as it pulled away from the gate and taxied 49 minutes in line for takeoff. At various points during this hour the co-pilot makes observations to the pilot, like:

"*It's a losing battle trying to de-ice these things. It gives you a false feeling of security, that's all it does.*"

This is seemingly dismissed by the Captain, who says, "*Well, it satisfies the Feds,*" (meaning the government regulators).

While they wait in line, the co-pilot tries again, "*Look how the ice is just hanging on his, ah, back, back there, see that?*" (referring to another plane in line)

And then, "*See all those icicles on the back there and everything?*"

And looking at an instrument panel, suggesting an icing problem:

Co-pilot: "*God, look at that thing. That doesn't seem right, does it? Uh, that's not right.*"

Pilot: "*Yes it is, there's eighty.*"

Co-pilot: "*Naw, I don't think that's right. Ah, maybe it is.*"

Pilot: "*Hundered and twenty.*"

Co-pilot: "*I don't know.*"

The co-pilot on Flight 90 is acting just like...a co-pilot. In fact, Oresanu and Fischer have found that pilots most often chose the clearest form of communication - a command. But co-pilots overwhelmingly choose the most indirect methods of speaking up when trying to alert the captain to a problem. They hint.

Hints are also the hardest kinds of requests to decode, and the easiest to refuse.

Mitigating risks.

The NASA researchers refer to these increasingly indirect or polite forms of communication as mitigated speech, and much of the safety training in the last fifteen years has focused on trying to mitigate the prevalence of mitigated speech in the cockpit, encouraging co-pilots to speak up earlier and more clearly.

Think that as long as you stay out of the skies you're safe from the dangers of mitigated speech?

Think again.

We all use mitigated speech anytime we are ashamed, embarrassed, or deferring to authority. We soften the message, try to be "diplomatic" or avoid tough topics altogether.

And this is particularly so when status and hierarchy are in play. We have been teaching people skills for having "difficult conversations" for fifteen years, and managers and executives will often say to us, "This is great for talking to subordinates or clients. But will it work talking to my boss?"

What are they trying to say in a rather mitigated way? (After all, we are at least nominally "in charge" of the course they are attending.)

They're saying: *"This isn't going to work with my boss."*

Speaking "up."

We decided to test this, and to focus specifically on how to talk "up" in hierarchy. We wrote a short scenario in which an executive reaches out to a favorite direct report, asking them to pick up and run with a new idea they have. The boss is very excited about the idea - it's a brilliant new vision that's bound to be a huge success.

Only the idea we created for the boss to pitch was simply, on-its-face, bad. Terrible. Obviously the worst idea in the history of the organization.

It was so bad, in fact, that the people playing the boss in some cases had trouble pitching it with a straight face.

And yet....

To date we have not had a single subordinate clearly tell the boss that they think the idea is a bad one. A few subordinates are able to stall. They tell the boss they want to do a bit of research or thinking, and get back to them (they say

they are hoping someone else will tell the boss it's a terrible idea in the meantime).

Most subordinates end up not only failing to express their view of the idea, but also with responsibility to execute it successfully.

Your organization at risk

Why does this matter? Because the quality of decision-making depends on gathering accurate and broad information. Each individual in an organization has a unique view of the game. The design engineer has the most data about the cheapest, safest packaging options. The salesperson in the field understands the nuances of the customer's concerns. The nurse preparing the patient for operation knows the most about the patient's emotional state. That kind of information is crucial to sound decision making.

Now, most of us sit on both sides of this divide. We have a team of subordinates, and we typically think of ourselves as approachable, and our team as able to raise things with us.

But we also have bosses, and are acutely aware of how difficult it can be for us to speak up to them. And we hold these two ideas without seeing any apparent contradiction.

The upside of this is that we can work on both fronts to improve communication in hierarchy in organizations.

As boss: you are the message.

Encouraging subordinates to tell you when you are wrong or to give you bad news involves more than simply saying, "My door is open," or "I really want feedback." Actions speak louder than words; your team is watching how you actually react when people do come talk to you. If you are distracted, busy, dismissive, or immediately explain why their concern isn't a problem, you can bet they won't take the risk again.

In short, who you are, and how you are, is the loudest message they hear. Some tips:
- ✓ Own up to mistakes or things you know you need to do differently, regularly.
- ✓ If you lay out your own view, be sure to ask, "What are we missing?" One airline Captain tells his co-pilots, "I don't fly as often as you do these days, so be sure to help me out."
- ✓ If someone raises an issue (e.g., "This deadline just isn't realistic") ask a follow-up question, or ask for a

suggestion for how to solve the problem before you respond yourself.
- ✓ When you make a decision, share the data and the views you took into account that may have weighed against the decision, to let people know you heard them and took their concerns seriously.

As subordinate: Talk up clearly.

Most of us also need to talk "up" to bosses, executives and board members. As Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson identifies (see sidebar), skillfulness matters.
- ✓ Explain your intentions behind raising the issue, e.g., "I want to be sure I understand the thinking behind this...."
- ✓ State a concern as a concern rather than as a skeptical question. Don't say, "Have you thought about...?" which implicitly requests reassurance. Say, "I have a concern about.... What's your thinking about that?"
- ✓ Be clear that it's their decision, "At the end of the day, you need to make the call. But I want to make sure you've got full information....."
- ✓ Be clear about your own boundaries. "I just don't think I'm going to be the right person for this..."

FAA training for pilots and co-pilots is even clearer about co-pilot responsibility, requiring them to take over the plane if the Captain doesn't heed repeated, specific requests to attend to a problem.

With the lives of our organizations hanging in the balance, certainly there are occasions where even this may be in order.

Final call....