Blogpost: How to have honest conversations within the team

FROM CULTURE BITES EPISODE - MR GOURLEY HS NEW ZEALAND, MS CANTER HS AUSTRALIA

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Having honest and open conversation is at the top of the wish list of many teams. But even effective teams struggle with this aspect of communication. In this blog post, we would like to first address how we can spot the signs that team communication may not be as open as it could be, moving on to the question what the roadblocks towards open and honest conversations are. We will then check out some tips Corinne and Dom provide for creating the environment for the conversions that we really want to have.

Tell-tale signs for less than honest conversations

We can observe various aspects in the interaction within a team both in how points are raised but also how they are received which will show us that we could improve the openness of our communication. One tell-tale sign is the use of a lot of "padding" when a point is made. This includes language that is indirect and unsure using expressions such as "maybe", "I might be wrong", "sometimes", or generalized and unspecific, such as "other departments" without naming them specifically. The use of wordy, flowery expressions rather than stating a clear point is another aspect of padding. A similar strategy is that of rationalization, accompanied by explanations and justifications why we bring up a point in the first place, but not going into the specifics of an issue. This serves to make a point less personal and ensure that other team members will not feel offended. We may also consciously address "the elephant in the room" and then relativize by talking about how it is not that huge and important.

A second sign is that same point will come up repeatedly. This can occur during the same meeting but also over weeks and months and shows that the point remains unresolved and may need to be further explored from different angles. If the same team members keep bringing up a point this may show that they do not feel heard in their opinion on that particular issue and never fully bought into a resolution that may have been made.

Another sign is how a point made is not actually made. At least not during the actual meeting. People may vent during the meeting and discuss "by the vending machine" but the issue in question is not addressed officially or directly discussed with the person concerned. This type of behavior is typical of the Avoidance style.

But low levels of openness not only show how points are raised but also in the reaction to these points. This ranges from reacting with complete silence where you could hear a pin drop once a point is brought up to the conversation moving on to a different topic. When a point just goes into the void or is not further discussed, not only is the point abandoned but also the person making it. Which will lead to the isolation of that person and to this being probably the last time they raise a point. The use of humor is also frequently used in such situations as it helps to overcome the awkwardness of silence and to avoid getting to the point. This escape valve prevents the conversations we should be having from happening.

Road blocks for honest conversations

Before we address a point that we think might not go down well with everyone we usually weigh the consequences and ask ourselves whether making a point is worth the risk. This is equally true for teams who work together effectively and get along well as for less effective teams that already experience some level of conflict. In effective teams the risk of upsetting someone and thereby damaging the great atmosphere may prevent people from speaking up.

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We will be equally hesitant in a team where we know the reaction will be less than pleasant. We might be afraid that any kind of criticism will be taken the wrong way. The fear of an open conflict and even sanctions may render team members unable to speak openly. Especially when we remember a precedent we will surely think twice before opening our mouths to speak again. In a team this creates a dynamic that can be very hard to break.

However, we pay a high price for our fear of the consequences that our honesty may have. Small issues that remain unaddressed over time (sometimes months or even years!), because the first step just seems too hard, are swept under the rug. Before long, we are afraid to address the point because now it seems like a BIG conversation. This can lead to true resentment toward another person as we are still as annoyed but the conflict is still smoldering away under the surface.

Enablers of honest conversations

We need to build the platform for having an honest conversation before the actual conversation. Creating a culture of trust within the team and the organization will be paramount if we want to have more honest conversations. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix for increasing trust. Just saying to people that "this is a safe place" will not work. Trust is established only over time via the means of frequent and consistent interaction with others. Leaders play an important part as role models in this process. In practice this may mean that we may proactively start a conversation when the level of conflict is low by just checking in such as "Corinne, you are a little bit quiet today. Is everything alright?" It is important to understand the circularity of challenging conversations – while they require a certain level of trust, they will also strengthen relationships. When you are more task-oriented you may feel that talking is for getting things done and otherwise it is a waste of time. But every exchange you have with a person builds the relationship that forms trust and mutual understanding which in turn makes the whole team more effective.

To support the creation of a culture of trust we can use a few climate factors that will ensure that social interactions lead to establishing trust between team members. The first example is a feedback conversation between a team member and their manager. Dom recommends using the "positive, negative, alternative sandwich" all while putting an emphasis on the fact that we value the relationship with that person. In these situations, it is important to create a frame so the team member knows what the manager wants to talk about and why it is important to both of them. The manager can also be very upfront about the fact that this conversation is also not easy for them.

Another example is that of a team discussion when often, people cling to "their" point so much that the discussion gets heated. It is therefore key to first collect points neutrally, without judgement. Once all the points have been collected on a whiteboard for example their merits and downsides can be discussed in turn. Based on this, a solution that team members can identify with can be found – and it is important to clarify the process of coming to a conclusion with the team.

Finally, it is crucial to remember that the team dynamic carries everybody's fingerprints and thus everyone should reflect on their own reactions to feedback and understand their own triggers and where they come from. While we may think it to be best to be "nice" to others (Approval-orientation) we need to bear in mind that only to be clear and open (Constructive) is truly kind.

Would you like to learn more about ways to help create a culture of trust? We are looking forward to hearing from you **info@humansynergistics.de**.

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