



From Fear to Freedom

Abstract: A challenging discussion paper on how so many organizations are driven by fear. The problem is we don't recognize how commonly accepted behaviors and practices actually spawn trepidation among employees. The sad irony is that unless we can change our leadership mind-set we add fear upon fear and then complain about lack of engagement, half-hearted performance and the drought of innovative ideas. It is a biological reality that fear immobilizes people. This exploration goes on to discuss how leaders can move their organizations to a liberating culture of freedom.

It's hard to imagine anyone deliberately managing their organization through fear. But it just may be that fear is playing a bigger part in how your organization functions and in its profitability than you imagine. And not in a good way.

Look at this picture. What are you thinking as you tee up? Beyond "What deranged person designed this hole?" most of us just know we're going to end up in the sand. And sure enough when we do we say "I was afraid of that." Of course Tiger Woods would say "What sand?"

The 15th century French writer Francois duc de la Rochefoucauld said: "We promise according to our hopes and perform according to our fears." That is true in golf and certainly true in business.

These days there's a lot of fear out there and not all that much hope. This paper proposes that organizations inflict fear upon themselves to such a degree that the resulting behaviors turn those fears into self-fulfilling prophecies. Fear is a self-inflicted wound that can turn fatal.

Where do our fears come from?

It starts with bureaucracy. When businesses start up with a handful of people working out of a basement there's no fear. Maybe there should be but there isn't. People trust each other and simply do what needs to be done. No rules or job descriptions or silos. Just the joy of launching a dream.

Then people are added and we're not quite so sure about them. So we build an organizational chart with boxes and lines of control because we're afraid of things falling between the cracks – as they surely will because we perform according to our fears. When someone lets the team down we become even more fearful and add more controls and bureaucracy to ensure it never happens again – which it surely will because we perform according to our fears. The more bureaucracy we add the more logs we put on the fear fire.

We do that with policies too. A Director of Nursing friend once said "Policies are just scar tissue over an error." Someone does something not too smart and suddenly we become afraid others will do the same thing and so we issue a policy. In other words all bureaucracy and policies are fear driven. And all of it can all be traced back to a lack of trust in the organization.



If trust is low in your organization almost by definition that organization is fear driven. According to a Harris poll only 15% of people trust big business and that is only slightly better than the 8% who trust politicians. Never mind the soft costs of distrust, a Watson Wyatt found that the return in a high trust organization is 300% higher than in a low trust one.

I've seen policies over the most obscure issues and multiple pages just describing the dress code. Of course once you start down this road it is almost impossible to stop from adding policy on top of policy. Again – all the result of fear.

In no way is it being suggested that we need no bureaucracy and no policies – though entertaining that idea is refreshing. If we didn't have rules we'd be killing each other at intersections. The basic idea being put forward here is to simplify as much as possible, trust people a little more, and unless we'd be hurt or go to jail without it – get rid of every policy you can. While you're at it simplify the bureaucracy as well. Maybe there is no need to have three people sign off a \$100 purchase order.

In short – set people free from all of these restraints. The leader's job is to enable people doing all they are capable of doing. When things get in the way, remove them!

And yes, there may be a few who let you down in spite of all your efforts. If they can't think and do what's right for the customer, your company and their colleagues then they need to find a better fit somewhere else.

In a flat world the competitive differentiator depends on relationships and relationships depend on trust. Thomas Friedman in "The World is Flat" writes: "...trust allows us to take down walls, remove barriers and eliminate friction...trust is essential in a flat world." Open up, let go and enable people to be all they can be.

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