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BEST PRACTICE

DRIVING FEAR FROM THE WORKPLACE

by Dick Richards

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Disallowing or disowning fear extinguishes the passion needed to achieve organizational goals.
- Engaging human energy, including fear, and connecting it with organizational purpose is a fundamental task of management.
- Engaging human energy is an aspect of the art of management. It requires mastery of skills and techniques as well as intent to value the full spectrum of emotional energy.
- Human energy, particularly fear, can be oriented and employed as an effective tool for success.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s management guru W. Edwards Deming admonished managers to “drive out fear so that everyone may work effectively for the company.” He was referring to fear that causes people to distort or ignore unpleasant results. Deming held that such fear stifles learning. Despite Deming’s admonishment, fear still stalks workplaces and remains a potent force. The Discovery Group, an opinion survey organization, concluded that “half of all employees do not feel free to voice their opinions openly.”

Fear takes many more forms than the one Deming described. It is apparent when we retreat from speaking to someone who does not listen, or when we recoil from saying difficult things to people who are known to shoot messengers. Fear is present whenever we suspect a hidden agenda, or when we are summoned to find a better way of working. It shows up as job insecurity and as dread that our positions might be usurped. It is close by when we feel unwilling to take risks or do what we know is right, and whenever we masquerade as someone other than who we are. Startup companies frequently have an entirely distinct set of fears such as raising capital and making payroll.

Fear originates from different sources: as a consequence of the world we live in; or induced by people who want us to feel fearful; or self-generated in response to a challenge. Whatever its form or source, the effects of fear are insidious and pervasive; it corrupts learning, improvement, innovation, measurement, and relationships. However, fear itself is not the lone culprit. Disallowed or disowned fear, which I refer to as “unacknowledged fear,” is another, perhaps more insidious, danger.

FEAR AND PASSION

While it seems that fear ought to have no home in our workplaces, we do want passion. We want excitement about visions. We want enthusiasm for strategic plans. We want the energy that people bring to work when they feel those emotions. It’s obvious that emotions are sources of energy that compel action. That’s why we welcome passion, excitement, and enthusiasm. When people experience those emotions things get done.

It’s less obvious that emotions are inextricably connected to each other. We cannot readily isolate just one emotion. We cannot drive out fear, or any other so-called negative emotion, without the risk of driving out the energy we want—excitement and enthusiasm. Daniel Goleman, author of *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, writes, “When the dictates of a boss determine the emotions a person must express, the result is an estrangement from one’s own emotions.” For example, when a manager suggests, either directly or subtly, that he or she wants everyone to feel part of one big happy team, but never fearful, angry, or sad, people are likely to shut their genuine emotions down altogether and put on a happy face. Goleman calls this “emotional tyranny.” When we fail to acknowledge fear, we also extinguish passion. The result is a robotic workplace.

ENGAGING EMOTIONAL ENERGY

A fundamental task of management is engaging human energy and connecting it with organizational purpose. One popular model posits four kinds of human energy. *Physical* energy is the energy of the body. Engaging physical energy involves deciding who does how much of what work and

when. *Intellectual* energy is of the mind. Engaging it involves such activities as making sense of problems and finding creative solutions. *Spiritual* energy arises from feeling connected to something larger than the self—an idea, a cause, a place, a deity. Engaging spiritual energy is seen in attempts to gain commitment to a vision or mission; these are endeavors to enlist people in a higher calling.

Our concern is with the fourth of these—*emotional energy*, and specifically fear. Engaging emotional energy means, first, mobilizing the passion and commitment that spurs people into action and, second, dealing effectively with emotions that create barriers to such action. George Davis, cofounder of Davis & Dean, a global project-management education company, believes that our prevailing model of management fails when we deal with fear. Davis says, “We reward managers who are warriors. The warrior’s orientation is toward short-term goals: win today’s battle, take that hill.” With such a mentality, Davis believes, induced fear becomes useful because it’s a good short-term motivator. “The problem is,” says Davis, “if you use it again and again the fear becomes replaced by a sense of helplessness. This is typical of many corporate cultures. It is what employees of large organizations express when they resist change, dismiss change efforts, or become passive and cynical. Induced fear, which seems to work great in the short term, eventually creates apathy, a sense of oppression, and hopelessness.”

When induced fear loses its impact, the warrior’s impulse is to induce more fear. In the hands of a warrior, Deming’s injunction to drive out fear may become a license to make people afraid to be afraid, or at least afraid to admit to being afraid. Rather than engaging emotional energy, warrior managers are likely to kill it.

SELF-GENERATED FEAR

There is little human progress without fear. Psychologist Susan Jeffers said it this way: “The fear will never go away as long as I continue to grow.” This is a different kind of fear from the induced fear used to threaten people. This fear is the self-generated consequence of accepting a meaningful challenge. It can be a friend, a harbinger of an important opportunity. It is stimulating

“Increasingly our society does not see social obligation as the primary obligation of the individual. The primary obligation is loyalty to the corporation.”

(John Ralston Saul)



rather than paralyzing and can provide energy to meet the challenge.

Erik Sprotte, former director of human resources for Sears, accepted the challenge of helping to start a Web enterprise called FreeSamples.com. Self-generated fear arises from the challenge of “going where others haven’t gone.” Sprotte says, “I used to fear making a mistake like not having the facts at a meeting. This new kind of fear is good. It creates discipline and helps me focus on the important things that I really need to do.”

THE ART OF ENGAGING FEAR

While fear is an individual phenomenon, people collude with one another in order to allow it to remain unacknowledged. They agree, if only tacitly, that fear should be disallowed or disowned, that “we just don’t talk about those things around here.” Disallowing and disowning fear thus becomes a cultural norm. Managers can and should take the lead in encouraging people to allow and own their fear. Today’s business environment is soaked in challenge. Managers need all the energy they can muster from themselves and from people they manage. They cannot afford to ignore or destroy emotional energy, even when it arrives in an uncomfortable form.

Management, like any other work, is part science and part art. Engaging emotional energy is an aspect of the art of managing. As painters engage the energy of paint and poets engage the energy of words, managers’ artistic medium is the energy of the people they manage. So managers must be acquainted with human energy in the same way that a painter is acquainted with how paint behaves, or a poet with the rhythm of words.

MINI-CASES

HOW THREE COMPANIES DEAL WITH FEAR

Many organizations are reluctant to have outsiders know they are fearful, so best practices aren’t freely shared. However, Pfeffer and Sutton mention three companies that manage fear successfully:

PSS/World Medical, where managers work to get problems raised faster than they would be in a fearful environment, gives everyone the opportunity to communicate with others and does not punish honest mistakes.

SAS Institute, where David Russo, vice president of human resources said, “We punish nothing.”

Men’s Wearhouse, where senior managers believe so strongly in eliminating fear that a transgression such as stealing is often

viewed as a signal that development is needed rather than that the transgressor ought to be fired.

MAKING IT HAPPEN ►►

Mastery of any art depends on developing certain skills and techniques. Consider the following:

- **Befriend your own fear.** There are three skills involved in befriend- ing fear (or any other emotion): recognizing how it feels physically, putting it into words, and engaging it productively. None is easy in a work context, because most organizations discourage any emotion that seems negative. Find the people around you who are competent at managing their emotions. They are not those who overcontrol, but those who express emotions well and use them to create productive actions. Learn from those people.
- **Facilitate honest dialogue about fears of all kinds.** This requires developing a high level of trust. People won’t talk about their fears if there are negative consequences for doing so. Once fear is in the open, treat it as a gift. Treat induced fear as a signal that someone must learn to challenge rather than threaten. Treat self-generated fear as a signal that growth is at hand. It is important to listen and cope with uncomfortable situations.
- **Challenge rather than threaten.** Drive out induced fear and befriend self-generated fear. George Davis argues: “It is far more valuable to challenge people than to induce fear. The person will then create his or her own basket of fears that will spawn creativity.”
- **Connect people with purpose.** Erik Sprotte is convinced that people need to believe in what their organization is doing and need to know how their contributions make a difference. He says, “Good managers help others understand their role in keeping the boat afloat. When we know we have a common goal, and have owned our fear, we can keep each other inspired every day.”

CONCLUSION

Mastering the art of management requires developing skills and learning techniques for engaging human energy, including fear.

And it requires something more. In *The Art Spirit*, artist and art teacher Robert Henri wrote, “The technique learned without a purpose is a formula which, when used, knocks the life out of any ideas to which it is applied.” If we employ skills and techniques to engage the energy of fear, they will work only when coupled with a heartfelt purpose to value the full spectrum of emotional energy. When this is accomplished, your team will have the motivation, discipline and cooperation required to reach ever more demanding organizational activities.

For More Information

Books:

Deming, W. Edwards. *Out of the Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.
Goleman, Daniel P. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2000.
Henri, Robert. *The Art Spirit*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.
Jeffers, Susan. *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992.
Ryan, Kathleen D., and Daniel K. Oestreich. *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace: Creating the High-trust, High-performance Organization*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Web Sites:

www.articles911.com offers articles about managing difficult emotions such as anger and fear.
www.discoverysurveys.com/articles/itw-14.htm, the survey about workplace fear mentioned in this article.

See also:

- ☆ **Really Leading: Leadership That Is Authentic, Conscious, and Effective (pp. 222–23)**
- ☆ **SQ: Investing in Spiritual Capital (pp. 43–44)**
- ☆ **Viewpoint: Margaret J. Wheatley (pp. 273–74)**
- ✓ **How to Network and Market Yourself (pp. 758–59)**
- ✓ **Identifying Your Marketable Skills (pp. 748–49)**
- ✓ **Leaving with Style: How to Exit with Dignity (pp. 800–01)**
- ✓ **Making the Decision to Take a Risky Career Move (pp. 806–07)**
- ✓ **Managing Career Transitions: How to Enter an Entirely New Field (pp. 802–03)**



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“If your employer starts upon a course which you think will prove injurious, tell him so, protest, give your reasons, and stand to them unless convinced you are wrong.”

(Andrew Carnegie)