

Hey, boss.

Lack of trust shuts down creative debate in the office. And that's not good for you or your company

BY ART CHAMBERLAIN

So, the boss asks, "what do you think?"
Do you:
■ Shuffle your notes, trying to look busy?
■ Nod and avoid eye contact as a colleague tells him what a great idea he has?
■ Tell the truth?

The answer probably depends on trust. Do you feel the boss really wants an honest answer? Or do you know from past experience that making a negative comment will mean trouble for you?

If the boss's question ties your stomach in knots, it's not good for you — or for the company.

"A lack of trust basically shuts down the kind of communication that you need to generate creativity and innovation, because people are not prepared to take risks," says **Graham Lowe**, a sociology professor at the University of Alberta.

Sharing honest opinions can spur creativity and success, or tear an office apart — the result depends on how they are received and handled.

In any knowledge-based industry, a free and frank sharing of opinions is crucial to long-term success.

"The main benefit is people can prime other people and force them to think along a new path," says **Simon Taggar**, professor of human resources at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont.

Most companies like to think they are open to frank discussions, but that's not the case.

"Companies have code for the denial of dissent," notes author and corporate trainer **Peter Block**. "Nobody says, 'We don't want any

dissent around here.' They talk a lot about alignment, marching to the same beat and being on the same page."

Prof. Lowe says the challenge for companies is to create an environment where people feel safe sharing their ideas and don't feel they will be attacked or lose the credit for their ideas to co-workers.

The way people are paid is one issue that can undercut efforts, he adds. "For example, there is a problem if people are all going after the same small pot of bonus dollars." Companies need to consider team-based pay, if they expect to promote team-based work.

He says people need to trust their co-workers, as well as management, before they will feel comfortable sharing ideas.

Prof. Taggar suggests that when companies want to promote creative thinking, it helps to have people from different departments and disciplines, such as marketing and manufacturing, work together. "You want to make it creativity enhancing, not stifling" and that's not easy, he says.

Prof. Lowe says it's "astoundingly simple" for managers to start

building the trust that permits creative debate. The key is good communication that includes information sharing, listening to employees and taking their ideas and needs seriously.

Managers simply need to spend time communicating and realizing it's a two-way street, and they need to listen, not just talk, Prof. Lowe says. "This is really basic stuff, but it doesn't happen enough."

The way mistakes or problems are handled also affects the level of trust.

For example, a postmortem on a project gone awry should be viewed as a "learning opportunity," not a chance to take a pot shot at somebody because they goofed up, Prof. Lowe says. "It requires a culture where mistakes are seen as the way an organization learns, so there is some tolerance for them, as opposed to people being immediately penalized."

If people feel it's "one strike and you're out," they won't be comfortable being critical or suggesting options that might fail.

Prof. Lowe says the round of

Can we talk?



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downsizing, restructuring and mergers of the past few years have seriously undermined open debate and trust in many companies.

His research shows that people need to feel secure in their jobs before they feel ready to communicate honestly. "It won't happen if people are waking up in a cold sweat at three in the morning wondering if their job is going to be there next week."

This doesn't mean people need a guarantee of lifetime employment, but they need to "feel they are in the loop, that they know what's going on and feel consulted."

Prof. Taggar says some companies use what is known as the Delphi technique to generate creative new ideas. This method usually involves a co-ordinator who poses the initial question and handles responses, keeping them anonymous so people don't feel intimidated.

The system works well when people do the brainstorming and idea generation by computer, he adds. "Often in a team meeting you have to wait for someone to hear their idea and you can lose

your train of thought. Also, at a computer there is no negative body language and no waiting for a response."

However, a growing number of researchers think brainstorming doesn't work because people fear failure and ridicule, Prof. Taggar notes. Especially in North America "we are driven to get things done and that leads to ideas being dropped too quickly."

People need to learn the skill of brainstorming and not challenging ideas, simply accepting them. Throwing out bad ideas is a second phase that must be separated from the first step.

In his new book, *When You Say Yes But Mean No*, Leslie Perlow discusses the problems that can arise when workers avoid conflict.

"Eager to protect important relationships and to ensure that our work gets done as efficiently as possible, we often silence conflict on core issues," he writes. "We believe that this is the best way to preserve our ability to work together. Yet we wind up achieving the exact opposite of what we want."

Mr. Block suggests that differ-

ences need to be channelled. Uncomfortable expressing their ideas, many workers suppress their views, keeping a lid on until it finally blows and their comments come out in anger, causing problems for them, he said.

People need to learn how to communicate their ideas effectively so this won't happen and creative debate won't get side-tracked. But author and business consultant **Robert Bacal** said in an interview that he believes only 5 to 10 per cent of people have the communication skills they need to succeed.

Under pressure, such as when we disagree about work issues, we tend to revert to the basic communication patterns we learned as children, he said. The problem is that those patterns are self-centred and based on getting our parents to do what we wanted, which isn't what we need in a corporate setting.

Some language can be inflammatory, while other words can cause people to work together to solve problems, he says. "The idea is to replace dirty, manipulative speech with constructive speech."

Toronto writer and researcher **Brian Stanfield** agrees: "When people get conversing there is too much debate and not enough sharing of their wisdom. Strange things happen when people get down to talk. First of all they get off the topic, secondly they start debating and arguing about the topic and they start attacking each other."

He says the problem is that people lack a method for talking without slipping into this mess.

"I think it's a basic skill when you work with other people," Mr. Bacal adds. "I don't see this as a human relations issue — oh, isn't it nice — it's a productivity issue because a lot of the teams that I see waste huge amounts of time spinning around in circles. It's a bottom-line issue."

He suggests one way to reduce problems is for teams to set ground rules before a discussion so that everyone knows they have the right to pipe up if they feel the discussion is going off topic, or becoming personal.