

Leadership and Hubris – How Leaders Inadvertently Stifle Innovation
By Joe Frontiera, PhD

“The great value of the Conventional Wisdom is that it is right much of the time. The greater value is that it provides a ready excuse and plausible cover to those in power when it’s wrong. So think of Conventional Wisdom as a truth that remains true because the individuals within any institution want it to remain true.”

– Jeff MacGregor, Sporting News Magazine

Recently, Paul Levy, the President and CEO of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, realized that the economic downturn had necessitated that he would have to reduce his staff. Not wanting to impose this type of hardship on his employees or their families, the CEO explained the organization’s current financial predicament in a presentation to employees. Then, he did something that is rare - he solicited his employees’ opinions about how the organization might overcome their financial hardships without cutting staff.

He was shocked by the response, as he was flooded with suggestions. Many contained realistic solutions, and collectively these suggestions reduced expenses to the extent where layoffs were no longer required. Many staff offered to take pay cuts; some suggested that they work one less day per week. Some departments unanimously voted to forgo their 3% raises, while others were willing to give up vacation and sick time.

Organizational leaders of all levels are faced with difficult decisions on a daily basis. Yet many paint themselves into a corner by creating a false choice. Should I cut staff from sales or finance? Should I eliminate the newest marketing project, or cut IT’s new initiative? Valuing decisiveness, leaders may consult other members of the leadership team or unilaterally make a decision, feeling that a decision made with alacrity is usually better than no decision at all.

But what if the above approach has a faulty assumption or, worse, multiple faulty assumptions? For example, in each case the leader has unconsciously narrowed the number of options to “two”, automatically eliminating the possibility that there might be a third or fourth option. Additionally, the leader has assumed that the only source of ideas to address the challenge lies at the top of the organization.

Not only are these assumptions faulty, but they also have negative systemic repercussions. When leaders assume that they are the sole source of wisdom, they slowly and inadvertently condition their employees to wait for answers and for policies to trickle down. In essence, leaders systematically strip employees of the will to contribute. This does not mean that employees do not have solutions to issues. But the odds are that they are not aware of the issues and, if they are, why contribute when they are certain their voice is not heard at higher levels?

In turning these assumptions on their head, leaders have the opportunity to view the world through a different lens and approach the problem in a unique manner. In approaching organizational problems with the perspective that there is never a dichotomous choice, and that answers to problems can come from all levels – even the ground floor – leaders can accomplish multiple objectives: they can forge an innovative, empowered organization while at the same time relieve themselves of the burden created by the belief that they must have all the answers.

When leaders adopt the mindset that an idea must exist somewhere in the organization, transparency is increased and innovation is encouraged. In order for an organizational member to help solve a problem, s/he first must know about it. Therefore, leaders who believe the answer *must exist within the organization* are more likely to publicize the problems and solicit potential solutions. This, in turn, systematically empowers organizational members to share their ideas on how a department can be run more efficiently, a process might be improved, or a task might be completed more quickly. Over time, employees will stop waiting to be told what to do and how to do it, and instead proactively contribute to the problem-solving process.

People *want* to be involved in their jobs, and individuals *want* to have a positive impact on their workplace. A leader's job is to *let* them.