



Aileron Contributor

We write about professional management for small business.

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

ENTREPRENEURS 5/15/2017 @ 8:26AM | 1,104 views

This Is What Happens When Leaders Are Transparent

Ineffective Communication is Often a Symptom of Larg...



For years, Wes Gipe, founder of [Agil IT](#), believed that successful leaders were always strong, always knew what to say, and always had all the answers.

“As a business owner, and particularly one that hadn’t been involved in a lot of other businesses prior to starting my own, I had this picture in my mind about what a leader should be, and it turns out that picture was not at all accurate,” says Wes, who is now a [Business Advisor at Aileron](#).

“I had this view of the captain on the horse...his sword at his side—that was my mental picture of what a leader looked like and was supposed to be,” says Wes.

Because of that perception, Wes never shared his weaknesses with his people. When setbacks occurred, he did his best to make sure they were covered up.

His approach, in part, worked: employees thought he was superhuman at times, he says.

But Wes began to see they were also afraid of him—something he was surprised to learn. “There they were, with their own challenges and failures, and they [were] looking at me, and thinking I [had it] all together,” says Wes.

“As result of that, I missed out on this tremendous opportunity to connect with these people in an authentic way,” he says. “These people that I care so much about, were afraid of me, and I just could not get my head wrapped around it. I could not understand it.”



Wes realized that by covering up his own mistakes and failures, he had never shown any vulnerability to his team.

“They believed I was better than they were, and that just couldn’t be further from the truth. I had made every mistake they had made, at least once, and unfortunately, some of them several times.”

The lack of open, candid communication had also shaped the company culture in a way Wes hadn’t intended. “We had plenty of conflict, but we didn’t have very much trust, and so there wasn’t a lot of pursuit of truth. It was more pursuit of individual agendas,” says Wes.

Give Away Trust First

To cultivate trust for better relationships, Wes took the first step himself, being more open with his team and showing vulnerability.

“When I began to open up, and share the folly along with the wisdom and the mistakes along with the successes, and the failures that I experienced, people began to respond with openness of their own,” he explains.

Vulnerability: The Key to Authenticity

By showing his people he trusted them enough to share fears, concerns, or setbacks with them, Wes began an evolution of his company’s culture. Team members saw his transparency as strength, and they began to share their own doubts, weaknesses, and challenges with one another. “I was afraid that if I revealed these things that no one would follow me,” says Wes. “What I learned was that the more I revealed, the more they followed.”

Wes says vulnerability also encouraged authenticity in the workplace. “What we saw was as people came out of their shells and became themselves, they became willing to just be radically

authentic.”

Along the way, teams became more agile and productive, too. “We moved the ball forward so much faster. We got so much more done when people were able just to put themselves out there, focus on the work, and pull together.”

Open Communication for Better Collaboration

Bob Johnston, CEO and chairman of the board of directors for [Front Burner](#), the management company for [The Melting Pot Restaurants, Inc.](#), says there is great power in creating an environment where employees [share their ideas, opinions, and can problem-solve together in a transparent way](#). “If you can’t communicate openly, with candor, how is collaboration even possible?” he says.

“We include our team in as many things as we can, discussing the good, bad, and the ugly,” says Bob. “We encourage all team members to be candid with one another and foster this by not exacting a price when people speak their mind, especially when it does not line up with the thinking of the day.”

Bob says it has taken time to evolve and to get to their current level of openness with one another. Encouraging that degree of trust is a commitment and the work is never done; Bob says right now, they are in the middle of identifying and honing their leadership model which supports the ability to be as open and collaborative as possible. It’s this focus on culture and authentic, conscious leadership that Bob credits as the reason the company has grown 5 times faster in its second decade of business compared with its first.

An Open Culture by Design

Open communication may start at the top, but look across your culture for areas where you can be more intentional about how you communicate. For example, Front Burner re-examined their daily conversations to look for ways to make [communication more open, constructive, and solution-oriented](#).

“We have a multi-year initiative to shift the majority of our communications to audio and/or visually rich communications,” explains Bob. In place of emails and memos, team members will be sharing more short videos or visual presentations with each other.

This format of communication can be viewed anywhere, and at any time. Sharing more visual communication will help support transparency, collaboration, and greater thinking from employees.

Front Burners’ office environment is also open. It may not be a fit for every company, but it helps the teams at Front Burner be open and collaborate more often. “We haven’t filled [our building] with private offices where people are isolated. We don’t hide all of our ‘junk’ behind pretty paneling or cover it with marble flooring. The ceilings are open—you can see the ‘guts’ of our home,” explains Bob.

“The exposed office was by design, to remind us of how we want to be as an organization: open, candid, honest, and authentic.”

Aileron is a non-profit organization with the goal of helping private-business owners find greater success. Learn more about unleashing the potential of your business at www.aileron.org

RECOMMENDED BY FORBES

[The 10 Most Dangerous U.S. Cities](#)

[Don't Give Away Your Salary Details -- Do This, Instead](#)

This article is available online at:

2017 Forbes.com LLC™ All Rights Reserved