

The Perfect Deadly Storm: Corporate Silence

The Lufthansa plane crash serves as a reminder: Leaders must encourage openness in their organizations.

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German airline Lufthansa might want to look at its screening process after a co-pilot committed murder-suicide in March (Photo of a Lufthansa airbus by Lasse Fuss, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

On March 24, co-pilot Andreas Lubitz committed mass murder-suicide by flying a jet into a mountainside, killing the 150 people on board. Slowly, information about Lubitz emerged and revealed a history of mental dysfunction that begged the questions: How was he permitted to fly? Who had this information, and why was nothing done with it?

Just five days after the crash, Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr declared, “Lubitz was 100-percent flightworthy without any limitations” as reported by the New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/27/world/europe/andreas-lubitz-germanwings-co-pilot-showed-no-warning-signs-before-crash-airline-says.html?_r=0). He also expressed his opinion (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/world/europe/lufthansa-germanwings-andreas-lubitz.html>) that Lufthansa’s screening process was state of the art “and we’re very proud of it.” How could the CEO of a well-respected German enterprise be so wrong?

On the surface, it would seem that Spohr’s public relations discourse was an attempt to protect Lufthansa. However, this tragedy and the ensuing misinformed statements indicate two lethal corporate phenomena that could be mitigated by the right leadership:

1. Corporate silence occurs when employees willfully withhold important work-related information that could inform critical decision-making, problem solving and innovative processes.
2. Upward communication distortion occurs when employees, who fear retaliation or harbor upward mobility aspirations, airbrush the truth when sending information up the corporate

chain of command.

Corporate silence has plagued many organizations, and it can be traced as far back as the Titanic. Engineers experienced futility when they tried to alert management of the limited lifeboat safety capacity. In one meeting Bruce Ismay, White Star Line chairman, discussed first-class carpet color for approximately three hours, leaving just 15 minutes for the safety topic. Sensing a lack of interest from management, engineers eventually gave up. More than 1,500 people died in the crash.

More recently, General Motors and its customers suffered greatly because of ignition switch defects that were hidden from key decision-makers in the company. GM employees were restricted to a list of acceptable pseudonyms when describing production defects. This list was known as the “GM Nod.”

The Home Depot experienced a data security breach in 2014 that posed risk to thousands of its customers, with reports that IT data security employees knew of the data security vulnerabilities and tried to get the attention of their superiors. They were allegedly told (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/20/business/ex-employees-say-home-depot-left-data-vulnerable.html>), “Home Depot sells hammers.” Experiencing futility, they gave up trying to convey this important information to leaders.

Silence can damage future growth unless companies wrap their arms around this phenomenon and its root causes. Cultures of silence are commonly caused by three conditions:

1. Leadership belief that they have the answers and their opinions matter most.
2. Futility, which employees experience when they conclude their voice has no merit.
3. Leadership behaviors perceived by employees as egregious or abusive, such as talking credit for one’s ideas or public ridicule.

The antidote to a culture of silence is a high-influence leader who has a need and a desire for self-reflection and insights; they are “other-centered” rather than self-centered: and they have a curious learning orientation. They operate from a belief system that says, “I have everything to know” instead of “I know everything,” and they are highly emotionally and socially developed.

Moving from a culture of silence to a culture of voice is possible with proper leadership development experiences and a determination to create and sustain a voice culture. Cultures of silence can be measured to determine the primary causes of silence, such as futility or egregious practices. Here is a quick test to see if leaders within your organization may be operating in a culture of silence.

How many times in the past three months have leaders in your organization:

1. Experienced the “bovine stare,” or a blank look, when they ask for input from the team?
2. Had someone on the team disagree with them in a group setting?
3. Had someone suggest an idea or problem solution that was very different from them or from the common views expressed by group members?
4. Said to a direct report, “Let me play devil’s advocate” or something similar?

Your answers to these questions may indicate that you operate in a culture of silence. If so, you can shape a culture of voice with determination and perseverance.

In the Lufthansa case, Spohr claimed, “It will be a long time to understand how this could happen.”

He only needed look in the mirror with his entire team to see how leaders shaped a culture that prevented the truth and airbrushed critical information from making its way to the C-suite. He and his team must analyze the root cause of this tragedy and reshape the Lufthansa culture — or risk another crisis.

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