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Valuing Those Who Tell You the Bitter Truth

We wanted to share a conversation between *New York Times* reporter Adam Bryant and Pamela Fields, CEO of Stetson. Bryant begins by asking Fields about her first management position. Fields responds by saying she made every mistake in the book. In particular, she could see the route from tasks A to F but poorly articulated her thoughts to her staff. She describes how early in her career, her staff called a meeting and candidly told her that they were unhappy working for her, that her goals were unclear, and that she did a poor job of explaining her vision.

Fields credits this event with making her a “more intelligent operator.” She grew to appreciate the need to tell people what she wanted and to convey the reason why it was important. This experience made Fields vow to create an environment in which truth was important. Fields continues by describing how important it is that her team knows she “has their back.” If something goes wrong, Fields wants people to know that it is her problem and, if something goes right, that it is a testament to the team’s successes. Fields states that she will always put herself in the line of fire for her people and that empowers them to come to her when they need to.

Fields concludes by stating that she looks for innate intelligence when evaluating a potential candidate. This characteristic can be identified by listening to how people talk and express themselves, and by analyzing the level of sophistication in their comments. After an interview, Field asks each candidate to write a letter regarding what he thought about the conversation, what he feels should have been discussed, and what parts made him uncomfortable. Fields also asks each candidate to include an example of a time when he displayed courage in a job.

Tell me about your early career decisions?
I majored in nuclear engineering and nuclear arms control through the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. But when I went to work for an engineering firm, it was the wrong fit. It was terrible, and I had no business to be there.

So I decided I wanted to go into cosmetics, and I went to the phone book, opened it up to the cosmetics and beauty section, and I started with A. The first company I saw that I had heard of was Avon. So I called them up. They had an opening on the Brazil desk, which is to this day one of their biggest markets. I learned to choose which of their thousand products should go into their little biweekly brochure.

And after doing that very well I was promoted to a job developing lipsticks and picking great shades for blushes and eye shadows. I was then promoted to manager of color, and all of a sudden I had people working under me. There were three people in the group. And I didn't know anything about management. And I was awful. I made every mistake there was to make.

Such as?
I would see what I wanted to accomplish. Let's say I saw from A to F, but I would forget to tell everybody what F was and what the steps were for getting there, and I was just a bull in a china shop.

So what happened?
Fortunately, I had people working on the team who were not shy. And they called a team meeting and they sat me down and they said: "You're really smart. We know you're full of energy and passion. But you're not telling us what you want and you're not telling us how you think we should get there and why, and you're doing a bad job and we're not happy working for you."

And how did you react?
They were older and more experienced than I was, and they had a lot of spine. I was so grateful to them. I mean, can you imagine how lucky I was to have had that experience so early on in my career, that someone could sit there and put the cold washcloth on my face and say, "You have to articulate. You have to tell people what you want. You have to have a reason why, and you can't operate as an island."

I also had a director of the department who was extraordinarily generous as a mentor. Every time I thought I had it right, she would turn around and say: "Did you think of this? Did you think of that?" I was used to getting A's at Princeton, and you think you're a reasonably smart kid and you get it right the first time. But I was humbled, and I was broken down into little pieces and reassembled as a much more intelligent operator.

What else did you take away from that experience?
The lesson I learned, which I think has made a big difference for me, is the importance of telling the truth, and being in an environment where truth-telling is valued, just the way these women came to me and told me the truth about what I had done. I vowed to create an environment in which truth was important.

And you know, it takes a lot of spine to tell the truth, especially in a large organization, where obfuscation is a political skill that I don't have. I see a problem, I see an opportunity, and I want to go for it. Business is too fast and we have to move. So everything else was a subset of that lesson, and it was really important; I can even tell you what I was wearing when they laid me out.

So what kind of playbook did you develop?
You have to be respectful of the politics and the process in order to be effective. But as a consultant, you were able to say things that other people might not be able to say comfortably and advance the ball on behalf of your client. But I never just jump in and go; you jump in and listen. I used to joke that I was on my Hillary Clinton listening tour at every single company. It's not unusual, it's not new, but it's essential. You sit down with everybody and ask them: "What's working for you? What's a momentum killer?" That's a good question I ask people all the time: "What's stopping you from being successful or your project from being successful? What is working for you that you wish you could build on? Why can't you build on it, or how have you tried to build on it and it hasn't worked?"

And I would spend the first three weeks doing that, no matter what the assignment was. I would write a report for myself, a way of organizing my thoughts so I would have a way to go forward. Then I shared the report with my client, because it's part of the truth-telling. You can't advance things if you don't. But there are definitely cultures that are more willing to fail. There are definitely cultures that are more willing to be a risk taker, and there are lots of cultures that profess that they're willing to do both and would die rather than actually live that dream. You sometimes see leaders who profess to want risk, but every other signal they send is, "Don't do it," because the compensation plan doesn't reward risk and the last guy who tried something really different is working somewhere else. And if you send those subliminal or not-so-subliminal messages, people aren't dumb. They're going to figure out how to game the system.

What's it like to work for you day to day?
The first thing you'd know is that the pronoun I hate most in the world is "I." I really like to think that everybody knows that they matter and that they're all part of the team. And they know I have their back. I think that's the most important thing I can offer people — that if something goes wrong, it's my problem; if something goes right, it's their success.

And you will say that explicitly?
Explicitly. I say it to everybody. I tell them that if they do something wrong, and it's on my watch too often, then I clearly won't be able to hang around to help them. So we have to work with one another. But I say this explicitly. I am always there; I will always put myself in the line of fire for people. There's never been an exception. I take the bullet. That's my job. So I'm very loyal.

And people know that they can come to me and let me have it if they think I'm wrong. And I love that. I love people saying, "That is the silliest idea and here's why and here's what we should be doing instead." If that conversation happens, it's a success. I can't always promise them I'm going to agree that what I'm advocating is so stupid, but there's a complete fear-free zone.

How do you create that?
There's usually a lot of support for it, and there's no indication that anyone is harmed if they bring something up. In fact, I will bring it up at public forums: "So-and-so came to me and said that this idea isn't going to work; it's dumb. Can we all talk about it?"

So by publicly acknowledging that there's a difference, people are emboldened to do it. And if I've already told them that I'm going to ultimately take the blame anyway if something goes wrong, people are much more likely to speak up. I also tell people that I don't like surprises. Keep me in the loop. But if it goes wrong, it's my problem, not yours. It really seems to free people up. It sounds trite, it sounds cliché, but it's really not. I found that no matter what culture I've gone into, it's worked.

Can you elaborate more on the thinking behind that?
People are so used to being measured for their individual performance. And if they do something wrong, they have all sorts of unpleasant conversations like, "This can't happen again," or, "I appreciate that you tried something different but that was your one shot; we're not going to do this anymore."

But it's my job to have the vision, and it's my job to orchestrate the day-to-day execution. So if something goes wrong, ultimately it's my problem. And I think there are a lot of people who are afraid to step up and take on that responsibility. They're very willing to take on the responsibility of saying, "This is where you should go," but very few people in my experience are willing to say, "If things don't work out as planned, I'm the one that's responsible," rather than saying: "Yeah,

he's got to go. His fault. He was the head of the team; it's his fault." But I put him at the head of the team, so it's mine.

The point is to make people feel safe and make them feel like they have a chance of recognition. How many times do people kill themselves to write a manifesto and then hand it off to the boss, who goes to present it at a meeting to which they're not even invited? And if they're lucky, they might get some sort of top-line summary of how it went: "Yeah, it went great." So it's kind of liberating to know that that's not going to happen.

It also sets an environment where people think they're going to be involved in cool stuff early, that what they do is going to matter. Because if it's important enough for me to take the bullet, it must be real important. It must be a cool thing. It's not rearranging the filing cabinet. And I found it to be a useful thing for me.

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