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CONSTRUCTIVE CHALLENGE — A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

We have all experienced that moment when someone says or does something that we do not fully agree with; others feel the same and yet no one speaks up. We pause to muster the courage to address the issue – to challenge the idea or the action – but we pause too long and the moment passes. Does this sound familiar?

Results from the Cornell National Social Survey (CNSS) show that we are not alone; 20% of respondents stated that fear of being reprimanded led to them choosing not to speak up or challenge. This is consistent with research conducted by Ethan Burris at McCombs School of Business (University of Texas); not only do employees who challenge more face increased hostility from their managers, they are more likely to experience a negative impact in their performance assessment outcomes. This is likely to occur even when they take a constructive approach to challenging their managers and business leaders.

Despite the protections given to employees, many choose not to speak up even when they are aware of notable misconduct in their organisations. A survey conducted by the Institute of Business Ethics found that of the 20% of British employees who were aware of misconduct, only half of them chose to report it – with the other half citing fear of retaliation as a reason they held back. However employees should not be put in a position where they feel they have to choose between protecting themselves and protecting others.



Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States said: “Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.” This applies just as much to organisations – by speaking up and challenging appropriately, we each have the opportunity to positively contribute to the culture of the organisation, its long-term success and the cultures we pass on to the next generation of leaders.

CHALLENGE - VALUE VERSUS PERCEPTION

We also know that constructive challenge is at the heart of cultures that encourage innovation, and is also an increasingly recognised requirement when looking at corporate governance. In McKinsey’s 2016 “Toward a value-creating board” report, it was found that on the most forward thinking and value-creating boards 76% of directors felt they constructively challenged each other and the management team; this compared with only 53% of directors on “complacent boards”. A number of other reports and research papers also point to the advantages of challenge in teams and across organisations.

Why then do most of us hesitate when it comes to providing constructive challenge?

In addition to the risk of being reprimanded, another reason is perception; there is a fear of being seen as confrontational even when the challenge is positioned carefully. Antonia Macaro and Julian Baggini wrote in the Financial Times about the importance of differentiating between challenge and confrontation; the former being more constructive and the latter sometimes being more adversarial. Depending on the culture – both societal and organisational – in which we work, challenge can be perceived negatively and lead to defensiveness thereby not achieving the challenger’s goal.

The impact of perception is particularly important given its implications for women. According to research conducted by Leah Sheppard and Karl Aquino, female-female conflict is perceived more negatively than male-male or male-female conflict. It’s a double whammy for women; challenge and not only is it perceived as confrontational and adversarial, it is potentially also viewed more negatively compared to when male colleagues find themselves in a similar situation. Does this lead to women feeling less comfortable about speaking up?



Apparently not. The aforementioned CNSS survey found that women were just as likely to speak up as their male colleagues – despite the repercussions, including reduced remuneration – as evidenced in research conducted by Victoria Brescoll of Yale. However we do know that women are less likely to challenge specific topics, for example when it comes to speaking up in compensation negotiations where they may feel that challenge may be perceived as aggression or arrogance.

Not only do individuals miss out when they are not in cultures that promote debate and constructive challenge, organisations are also at a disadvantage. The cost to organisations when an employee hesitates to speak up has been found to amount to up to \$7,500 in redirected resources. This is just a fraction of the aggregate value lost to the organisation, not to speak of the stress and anxiety experienced by individual employees as they internally battle the desire to speak up with the fear of being reprimanded – a period of more than seven days according to a study.

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ENCOURAGING CONSTRUCTIVE CHALLENGE

It is in the interest of organisations and individual employees to address the barriers to effective challenge and to foster cultures where everyone – regardless of where they sit in the organisational hierarchy – feels comfortable to express concerns and challenge both their colleagues and leaders.

There are a number of things organisations and individuals should consider when looking to enhance corporate culture, including policies and formal training. In addition to the more formal initiatives put in place, there are things each and everyone of us could consider to ensure we are moving from 'agree or silence' to 'speak up' cultures.



1. COACH “REBEL TALENT”

For the group of individuals within the organisation who are willing and able to challenge the status quo and bring forward ideas – rebel talent – it is important that they are coached in how they present proposals, concerns or opinions on key matters. Lois Kelly and Carmen Medina, co-authors of “Rebels at Work: A Handbook for Leading

Change from Within”, found that rebel talent often fell into the same traps; failing to prioritise ideas, fighting the cause on their own, giving up early, missing danger signs (for example, exhaustion) and simply not landing the message effectively.

We owe it to these individuals to provide the support and guidance they need to take on what can be difficult conversations. Leaders across organisations, whether formally or informally, should engage with this group of employees and ensure their positive energy and enthusiasm is directed appropriately. The risk otherwise is that this group is left disengaged and ultimately disillusioned – a loss to the organisation and the next generation of hopefuls.

2. ENCOURAGE FEMALE VOICES

All employees should be encouraged to speak up – not least women. Evidence shows that women are more likely to be penalised for speaking up so it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that women feel they have channels to air their views without fear. Organisations cannot afford to have women leaving because they were not provided safe platforms to vocalise concerns.

This applies at every level of the organisation; unlike their male colleagues, women who hold more senior positions and more authority are no ‘safer’ than more junior women. Although not a significant factor,

