REAL-EYES

Introduction

Don, the Head of Purchasing, was a beefy man in his early fifties. He was easily over six foot and was carrying a couple of stone of extra timber, most of which seemed to armour the upper half of his body. He had a substantial neck and cold hard eyes that gave off little warmth when you made contact with them. It was well known across the organisation that he was prone to angry outbursts and it seemed that the fuse to set him off was frighteningly short – a behaviour trait that was apparently impervious to the best efforts of the organisation's anonymous 360 feedback system to correct. Jody needed to have a conversation with Don - to explain that she was about to purchase a large item of capital expenditure and she would not be using his team's services to assist her – she had found an apparently cheaper way to acquire the item without them. The mere thought of the conversation led her breathing to become shallower, her heart rate to increase and her stomach to gently lollap. She shook herself realising that she had been thinking about the conversation for at least five minutes and had been lost in the different scenarios she had been playing over in her imagination. None of them gave her much hope. She realised that she was feeling warm all over – the Ready Brek effect!

This paper reviews a number of approaches to being authentic and talking straight and handling situations like the one described above – situations that anyone who has had positions of responsibility in an organisation has faced at some point. It starts by offering some definitions and considers why it is an important issue for those who work in organisations. It then critically examines a number of approaches to handling those conversations.

What is authenticity and why is it important?

What does it mean to be authentic? Carpenter (2002:2) defines it as:

> "Being true to self and true to values, and involves honesty and truthfulness, prioritising values and integrity and connection."

Similarly, Bossidy et al (2002:81) define it as:

> "You're real, not a fake. Your outer person is the same as your inner person, not a mask you put on. Who you are is the same as what you do and say. Only authenticity builds trust, because sooner or later people spot the fakers."

One of the challenges of being authentic, which is implicit within these definitions, is that you need to know your values and your self, such that you can be true to them. These are massive challenges and even something as apparently straightforward as establishing what the self is, varies enormously depending on the perspective you adopt (Guignon 2004).

Authenticity:

"Who you are is the same as what you do and say. Only authenticity builds trust, because sooner or later people spot the fakers"

Bossidy et al (2002:81)

The following definition makes this connection between being authentic and having a degree of self-awareness:

> "Authenticity refers to being true to oneself. In humanistic psychology, authenticity is seen as a desirable goal because it relates to emotional awareness, freedom from social repression of thoughts and feelings, and direct honest communication." (Tosey and Gregory 2002:13)

So a challenge in being more authentic is to not only know how you feel and what is important to you, but to then have the skill and courage to be open about that and to do it appropriately. Many (Scott 2002 and Back &

Back 1992) note the challenge that this presents, especially given the socialisation and repression that most people experience whilst growing up which tends to inhibit direct authentic communication (Heron 1992:57, 8). It is precisely because it is difficult to do, that when people are appropriately authentic it creates impact and a potential sense of connection with another.

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An interesting question is who decides what is an appropriate level of authenticity? One of the strengths of a somatic based approach, as opposed to a mental and skills based approach, to being more authentic and talking straight, is a strong emphasis on being more trusting of your intuition as a source of deciding what is appropriate. Strozzi-Heckler (1993:12) puts it as follows:

> "The life that is streaming through our body, with its rich currents of temperatures, pulsations, vibrations, swellings, and congealings, becomes our reference point for choices and responses. When we wonder about a direction to take, or an alternative to assess, we can consult the intelligence that resides in our body. This type of education is revolutionary, in the sense that it gives power to the individual. It fosters a way of being that supports and trusts the energy that moves through all living things."

Strozzi-Heckler (1993) asserts that being present to what is going on in our bodies has other benefits:

"When our words, perceptions and actions are born out of a living embodied presence, there is a genuineness that inspires and empowers our lives. An embodied presence is what exists when our entire body is in a state of attention, and it is from there that authentic contact comes forth." (Strozzi-Heckler 1993:118)

This is all well and good but anyone who has worked in an organisation will know how difficult it can be to be open and authentic. Because of this life in organisations is rarely characterised by open and honest dialogue (Perlow 2003) which can make it even more challenging to talk straight in that setting. So how do you go about being more authentic? There seem to be a multitude of approaches. I will review a selection of them and consider some of the challenges involved in talking straight.

Costs versus benefits

Some, such as Scott (2002), place a strong emphasis on weighing the costs of being inauthentic and ducking difficult conversations (emotional draining, even burnout, unsatisfying relationships, fear), versus the benefits (emotional relief, greater intimacy, health, less stress). The intention is that this will show rationally why it makes sense to talk straight about a particular issue we have with someone. This on its own ignores the power of emotion not only in driving behaviour, but sometimes in paralysing someone into inaction (Tolle 2001:27).

> Analyse the cost of deferring a conversation you would rather avoid. Normally we sit on tough conversations for too long

From my own experience, I have found that thinking about the costs and benefits helps me to see why I must act.

Get your thinking straight

Others, such as Back & Back (1992) believe that it is important, prior to any straight talking, to do two things: Firstly, get very clear on your rights as a person along with your responsibilities to others, in order that you can steer a middle course between, on the one hand, being aggressive, and on the other hand being submissive or non-assertive, where being aggressive might be seen as standing up for your rights but in some way violating the rights of others, and being submissive or non-assertive might be seen as over-emphasising the rights of others at the expense of sacrificing yours. Secondly, get your thinking and self-talk about a given situation calibrated against the standards of being assertive as opposed to aggressive or non-assertive. A strength of this approach is that it tends to smoke out beliefs and attitudes that are inconsistent with being authentic and straight in your communication, so it has a strong cognitive and intellectual emphasis which is an important component of performing in situations (Gallwey 2000:28).

> Be clear about both yours and the other person's rights. Is your self-talk aligned with this?

Whilst they recognise the importance of emotions, they take a very intellectual approach to dealing with them (Back & Back 1992:83) which arguably has limited effectiveness in successfully managing them (Heron 2001:75,6). They place little emphasis on the role of the body and physiology in both preparing for and managing situations where being authentic and talking straight may evoke an emotional reaction and yet others, such as Sieler (2003:8) would hold that this holistic approach is essential to enabling change.

Make a joke of it!

Margerison (1987:150) observes that humour can be useful in communicating how we feel in a situation, especially if we disagree with a stand or position that someone is taking. He asserts that it can be very effective in making a point and can lift the atmosphere, however he acknowledges the risk of doing this, in that humour is a fickle thing and what is intended as a humorous point can backfire and be received very badly. What he doesn't acknowledge is that excessive use of humour can be a defence against authentic conversation and it may be straighter, albeit leaving us more vulnerable, to just say what we think or feel.

Plan it out

Many, such as Harkins (1999: 22-3) and Scott (2002:148-158) stress the importance of having these straight conversations in a planned way, rather than just reacting and they each offer a way for doing that planning and preparing. When we are initiating a conversation about a potentially difficult issue, this planning, they argue, will help us to handle the conversation more skilfully and with better outcomes, and this intuitively makes a lot of sense. They offer broad frameworks for holding these conversations – see appendix 1 & 2. I have found it to be helpful to plan out those conversations that fill me with fear and apprehension. I find it gives me a map through the conversation and it helps me to imagine it going well and see myself arriving at a positive outcome. I am convinced that this often has a self-fulfilling effect.

What they seem to gloss over though, is what happens when the conversation drifts away from our plan. Scott (2002:157) acknowledges that it can be severely testing when we sail into the open waters of straight talking and our plan is firmly back in port.

It's not about skill or technique but how I feel about the other person that is important

Arbinger (2000) make some valuable and quite unique contributions to thinking about this. They make a strong connection between the reaction you get from someone and how

you really feel about that person. They assert that:

> "We can tell how other people feel about us, and it's to *that* that we respond." (2000:24)

Because of this, just using techniques as an approach to talking straight and to enhancing impact is fundamentally flawed because:

> "We can sense how others are feeling toward us. Given a little time, we can always tell when we're being coped with, manipulated or outsmarted. We can always detect the hypocrisy… It won't matter if the other person tries managing by walking around, sitting on the edge of the chair to practice active listening, inquiring about family members in order to show interest, or using any other skill learned in order to be more effective. What we'll know and respond to is how that person is *regarding* us when doing those things." 2000:27

Senge at al (2004:33) make a similar observation in the context of talking about one person challenging another's assumptions:

> "The form of the question doesn't matter. But the sincerity does. If questions like this are insincere they will backfire."

> Your intentions leak out – make sure you are clear about what they are

Likewise, Maister et al (2000:69) in their work on building trust in advisory relationships, argue that intimacy or sincerity is essential to establishing trust. Equally, self-orientation or self interest is one of those things that have a massively undermining effect on the feeling and assessment of trust. They argue that it somehow leaks out, like an aroma in the air. So, I may have my difficult conversation planned, but if my motives are pre-dominantly self-orientated and I don't really feel like treating the other person respectfully, it will leak out and no matter how good my techniques, I stand a strong chance of it all back-firing.

The presence of trust in a relationship can be a pre-requisite to straight talking for many people and yet this, and the history of a relationship, seems to be ignored by many authors, such as Scott (2002). So, Arbinger argue that the key determinant of the outcome of talking straight with someone is how I see that person and they say that I see people in one of two ways:

> "Either I'm seeing others straightforwardly as they are – as people like me who have needs and desires as legitimate as my own or ... I see myself and others in a systematically distorted way – others as mere objects." (2000:35)

Seeing people as objects can mean seeing them as obstacles, vehicles or irrelevancies.

> $$\text{Trust} = \frac{\text{Credibility} + \text{Reliability} + \text{Intimacy}}{\text{Self interest}}$$
>
> Maister (2000)

Maister (2000:69) argues that in an advisory relationship, this self interest, or seeing people as objects, has a devastating effect on building trust, which is expressed in a trust equation where trust = credibility + reliability + intimacy divided by self interest; and if people don't trust me, then I can muster all the skill in the world to talk straight about an issue, I can be smooth on the surface, but they will sense if I am being driven by self-interest or am trying to manipulate, even if what I am doing

is broadly an appropriate thing to do. I have worked for people who were extremely smooth operators, and in a number of situations I remember feeling that whilst the words that were being used suggested we were having an open conversation, I somehow felt I was being manoeuvred and manipulated. That made me very wary about committing to anything.

A massive strength of Arbinger is that they recognise that a solely technique orientated approach to enhancing your authenticity in relationships is fundamentally flawed, because people typically respond to how someone is at the level of being. It focuses attention at a deeper level than just mastering the latest techniques. That said, this is also a weakness of the Arbinger approach – it underplays the importance of someone's skills in a situation where people are trying to talk straight. It assumes that if you are coming from the right place, then everything will work out, which is too simplistic.

Whereas many authors skirt around the issue of emotions and focus more on intellect and thinking, Arbinger not only acknowledges their criticality to authentic, straight talking relationships, they also recognise both the liberating and deceptive nature of our emotions. They can both lead us into treating people as people but equally they can reinforce our self-justifying pictures of ourselves.

> So you don't 'throw your pearls before swine', ask your self: "Is the other person open to a straight conversation?"

A criticism of both the Arbinger (2000) approach and many of the other authors on this subject (Scott 2002) is that whilst they stress taking personal responsibility, they over-emphasise the role of 'you' in creating straight talking authentic relationships with others. They place very little emphasis on the role, state or maturity of the other person to whom you are relating. They assume that if you change, that is enough to change the nature of your communication. Chalmers (2005: 87-113) disagrees with that arguing that we all bring a lot of prejudice or 'listening' to any relationship and

> "Our listening has a big impact on the types of personal relationships we're available for." (Chalmers 2005:113)

You can be doing everything 'right', but I may have limited trust in you as well as bringing a lot of prejudice to that conversation. This could be a massive obstacle to a straight authentic exchange.

Some approaches, such as Margerison (1987) don't address the issue of seeing yourself as an object. A person may have a whole series of limiting stories about themselves and their ability to create impact and to deal effectively with challenging conversations and it could be these, as opposed to their attitude to others that is a major barrier to enhancing their impact and presence.

Developing emotional maturity full stop
There is also another school of thought that acknowledges the flaws in a technique orientated and intellectually grounded approach and focuses much more on the importance of both developing emotional resilience and quality of presence to having authentic conversations, even when the temperature starts rising. O'Neill (2000:21) is one of those and asserts that there is no substitute for self-development and developing maturity as whole people if we are to develop the capacity for authentic conversations:

> "These approaches are not techniques. It would be foolish to assume one could attain them merely through insight and understanding. They require a willingness to enter into a maturing process that builds resiliency. The more a person engages in the

REAL-EYES

lifelong work of honing these actions, the more a strong sense of presence can emerge."

Similarly, Bossidy et al (2002:67) acknowledge the importance of self-knowing and self-reflection and also how challenging this can be to develop in an organisational context:

> "Realism is at the heart of execution, but many organisations are full of people who are trying to avoid or shade reality."

They argue that a prerequisite to being straight with your-self, which is a foundation for acting authentically and with integrity, is

> The ability to be authentic and to develop a strong presence is ultimately about entering into a maturing process – there are no shortcuts

having emotional fortitude. They argue that four core qualities make up emotional fortitude (2002:81): Authenticity; self-awareness; self-mastery and humility. So whilst it may be attractive to think that I can learn a quick process or apply a simple model and I can become skilful at handling difficult conversations, these authors are suggesting that truly excelling in high pressured inter-personal situations requires a deeper and longer work than that. It requires willingness, amongst other things, to engage in a challenging level of self-reflection that may not always be comfortable. Jeffers (1987) and Scott (2002:124, 137) recognise that courage is needed to confront issues and that this can evoke all sorts of fears, such as fear of ridicule, rejection, damaged relationship, loss of job. Experiencing these feelings, working with them, and choosing to do things that feel uncomfortable in spite of them is an important part of the growth process. The relationship between self-knowing, self-reflection and growing as a person is well documented (Heider 1985, Schon 1982).

Close

Some approaches to straight talking focus on attitude, some on self-talk and internal dialogue, some on preparation, some on analysis, some on weighing the costs of not being straight versus the benefits of being straight, some on rights, some on courage, some on the body, some on emotion and many on a combination of the above.

I have looked at the limitations of a technique orientated approach to talking straight and being authentic, especially when things don't go according to plan. I outlined how a number of things are additionally important in these situations – being clear about our intentions, because they will ooze out like an aroma; authentically acknowledging our emotions in the situation, both to our self and possibly to the other.

An integrated holistic approach to talking straight provides a much stronger basis for creating lasting change, but by definition it is a longer developmental process however that developmental process has to start somewhere. Situations like the one Jody faced in the introduction can be a great place to start. Often in those pressure cooker type situations, we get deeper and more striking insights into the things that prevent us from talking straight, being authentic and being powerful people. We have a choice – we can use these, often painful, moments for significant learning and change or we can simply get through them, or even avoid them – and pass by the opportunity until the next one comes along, and if you work in an organisation, that opportunity will almost certainly present itself again – which is one of the reasons why being in an organisation can be a potent climate for learning and personal development. So, when are you going to have that difficult conversation that you have been avoiding?

Matthew Gregory
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[1] E-HBR has no journal numbers or page numbers that indicate where an article appears within that journal

REAL-EYES

Appendix 1 – Harkins' (1999:22-23) approach to preparing for a conversation that is likely to be challenging

To make challenging conversations effective it is important that all leader's go in to such conversations with confidence and a belief that they can achieve their chosen goal while maintaining and even possibly increasing their relationships with the different parties involved. Therefore, they must first obtain a clear understanding of how challenging conversations are structured.

1. **–** To open a powerful conversation, the initiator of the conversation must state their agenda with honesty or a sincere desire to come to a reasonable agreement. By signalling their sincerity the initiator conveys to the other parties the importance of the agenda. It also states a request for contribution and help.

2. **–** In the middle of a challenging conversation a key discussion will usually take place of the issues enmeshed within the agenda. By skilfully probing the other parties involved a high impact leader is able to successfully uncover the aims of the other parties that must be met whilst achieving the leader's own goals. This stage is also important as the high impact leader is able to unearth any hidden agendas and connect facts with underlying assumptions so as to advance with his/her agenda.

3. **–** When finalising a challenging conversation the high impact leader ensures the respective parties fully understand the next steps and are prepared to make these commitments a reality. The closing time in a challenging conversation is also a time when the high impact leader openly questions the other parties on whether the outcome of the conversation have complied with their initial goals. By questioning the other parties a high impact leader is able to ensure results.

Alternatively, you can always gauge whether you have had a successful challenging conversation by examining to what extent these three outcomes have been achieved:
1. Advancement of an agenda
2. Shared learning
3. A stronger relationship

REAL-EYES

Appendix 2 – Scott's (2002:148-158) approach to preparing for a conversation that is likely to be challenging

A. <u>Opening Statement</u>

Preparation when opening a conversation is key. By writing down what you intend to say and verbally saying it out loud it will help set the tone for the rest of the conversation. There are seven components to a successful opening statement.

1. **Name the issue-** Naming the problem is taking a first step towards solving the problem. Name the behaviour that is causing the problem and the area the behaviour is having impact. If there are multiple issues discern the common theme in each of the issues. By naming the central issue the conversation will have focus and meaning.

2. **Select a specific example that illustrates the behaviour or situation you want to change-** As you have only a minute to make your entire opening statement, this illustration must have impact. No long stories. Otherwise your audience will begin to shut down and loose interest, so keep it short. Giving an example is so important because if you are upset or disappointed yet can't accurately illustrate your feelings you lose credibility and are easy to dismiss.

3. **Describe your emotions about this issue-** By telling someone the feelings they are provoking in you, you are letting that person know that you are affected and you make yourself vulnerable. Describe what ever emotions you are experiencing. If you are upset or afraid, say so.

4. **Clarify what is at stake-** Ask yourself: why is this important? What do you feel is at stake for the individual whose behaviour you are confronting? Use the words "at stake," as they have an emotional impact, heads will turn and eyes will lock when you say "This is what is at stake." Be relaxed and speak calmly, not aggressively but explain why this is important.

5. **Identify your contribution to the problem**- Before we confront another's behaviour we must first look at ourselves and ask "How have I behaved in ways guaranteed to produce or influence the very results with which I am unhappy?" No long confession is needed here rather a brief acknowledgement that you have played some part in the problem you now intend to solve. It is a very easy trap to fall into, where your primary contribution is not effectively communicating clear expectations from the beginning of a project or relationship. It may come across as obvious but a large proportion of problems in both personal and professional relationships occur when there is a lack of clear expectations. As you consider the behaviours you wish to confront you may discover that these are the ones you could have anticipated. By making things clear up front which behaviours are acceptable, you can avoid numerous problems and you'll have little trouble when reminding a family member or co-worker the expectations they agreed to when the relationship began.

6. **Indicate you wish to resolve the issue**- By using the word *resolve* it indicates there is no firing squad waiting outside the door. This is not a termination, quite the opposite. When the model is used to confront an issue more relationships end up being saved. By saying "This is what I want to resolve" shows you have considered their interests.

7. **Invite your partner to respond**- When confronted about our behaviour it often feels we have been found guilty by a court and had been called in simply to learn our punishment. However by using this model we have given a clear and succinct message describing the impact of this particular behaviour. We have not condemned but reassured that it's in

everyone's best interests to resolve the issue. Now we are invite the other person to join the conversation even though it's still at a very early stage.

B. Interaction

8. **Inquire about your partner's views-** Although there is only one part in the interaction part of a conversation, this part of the confrontation is regarded as the most important and usually the bulk of the conversation. You have invited your partner into the ring and now you are the one listening. This is where reality will be open to scrutiny. In a situation where your partner says something you strongly disagree with resist the temptation to build a stronger case. Rather listen so that your own learning is provoked. Dig for full understanding by asking questions and don't get attached to what's on the surface.

The interaction stage in a confrontation is often where we are most tested. Containing your emotions during interaction with a person who makes you want to leap over the desk and strangle them is never easy. However, when struggling to come to terms with your partner's alternative reality, it's helpful to remember that in all conversations we are interpreting, using our own very individualised filters. Instead of jumping down your partner's throat as soon they say something you feel is off base, focus on examining your partner's reality and his/her filters. Finally, when your partner is aware that you understand their view of reality, look towards a resolution.

C. Resolution

During the interaction phase of confrontation, reality and learning are tested and relationships are improved. Now its time to discuss and agree what happens next- after all, your original intent was to resolve the issue. The following question's can be asked to achieve this:

9. **What have we learned? Where are we now? Has anything been left unsaid that needs saying? What is needed for resolution? How can we move forward from here, given our new understanding?**

How do we end the conversation?

10. **Make an agreement and determine how you will hold each other responsible for keeping it.**