

The honesty challenge

Abstract

A brief case which considers whether leaders should be told the truth about their leadership style.

Key words

Leadership, integrity, away days, organisational values

The case

The merger and reorganisation of two government agencies has been a time of uncertainty and change for those professional and managerial staff whose jobs survived. Jobs and ways of working are changing, with an ever-tighter focus on the latest political priorities. A new Chief Executive heads up the combined authority, and has recruited a couple of new Directors externally as well. Pat works for one of these, Jane, and is pleased when Jane announces early on that there will be a team-building 'away-day' for the whole department in 2 months time. Jane seems to appreciate that past differences need to be laid to rest, confidence in management strengthened, and that big issues surrounding departmental objectives and workplans need to be addressed. Later on, it is announced that staff from the Contracting section will shortly be transferred into the Directorate - and they, too, will attend the 'away day'.

Pat is surprised not to receive any documents or background papers before the meeting - except a sheet with directions to the conference centre and an instruction that 'dress will be informal: no suits or dresses'. But she still looks forward to a chance to get to know new colleagues; share concerns, and think further ahead than next week.

In the event, Pat is deeply disappointed and disturbed:

- The Contracting section staff are present, but effectively ignored.
- The Director starts by saying 'let's think about our objectives for the day - who can suggest some?' After five minutes gathering tentative and very varied suggestions she says 'well that's enough objectives' - and moves on.
- In some of the working groups staff do share concerns and identify what they see as issues. However, the Director responds sharply saying she is 'only interested in solutions,

not problems'. Other groups, Pat discovers, quickly adjust their reports to maintain a positive tone.

- Over lunch the discussion is entirely about the weather and Wimbledon. But some more intense discussion seems to take place among twos and threes in corridors, over coffee or in the toilets.

Overall, Pat believes the discussion was superficial, key issues were avoided, and if anything, the cynicism of staff has been reinforced.

The next day Jane breezes into Pat's office and says: 'Well, the 'away day' seemed to go off quite successfully, wouldn't you say?'

Discussion points

- How do you suggest Pat replies? Can she reply with integrity?
- What factors might Pat take into account, and what guidelines apply in such a case?

Tutor's notes

A relatively straightforward case that raises the tension between loyalty and integrity. Should Pat support the boss and tell her what she wants to hear or should she give her version of the truth. Might not loyalty be better served by telling the boss the truth? Is it a question of phrasing the truth in such a way that it doesn't look like a challenge?