

"How to Escape the Echo Chamber," Walter Kiechel

Good bosses take steps to make sure they hear more than just what their sycophantic underlings think they want to hear.



By WALTER KIECHEL III June 18, 1990

(Excerpt from Fortune Magazine. These and other Office Hours columns are full of sage advice then and now.)

Everybody knows it: You can't afford to become isolated at the top, hearing only agreeable tidings borne by simpering, yea-saying subordinates. If you don't believe this prime managerial truth, listen to the testimony of a couple of experts. From Andrall Pearson, ex-McKinsey consultant, former president of PepsiCo, now a Harvard business school professor: "Once you get a guy making decisions without access to information from competing sources, after a while he's dead." Or Walter Scott, formerly CEO of IDS Financial Corp. and chairman of Grand Metropolitan USA, currently on the faculty of Northwestern's Kellogg School: "All of us have had our share of bonehead ideas. Having someone tell you it's a bonehead idea before you do something about it is really a great blessing." And yet, for all the lip service paid to the importance of obtaining unvarnished truth, many a boss keeps wallowing in shellac. The manifold reasons for this suggest just how difficult it can be for the brass to change their ways. Observes Dee Soder, whose Manhattan firm, Endymion, counsels executives on psychological and business matters: "A high proportion of people who get to the top are conflict avoiders. They don't like hearing negatives, they don't like saying or thinking negative things. They frequently make it up the ladder in part because they don't irritate people on the way up." They may particularly dislike no-holds-barred disagreements among subordinates because, as Pearson notes, "they can't control the discussion." HOW SOOTHING, by comparison, to immure oneself in the echo chamber. But Sandy Weill, the head of Primerica and a manager famous for relentlessly chatting up his troops, fingers what may be the most telling reason bosses duck the truth:

If you talk with a subordinate and find out about a problem, "you end up taking some of the responsibility for it. Later on, there's not somebody else who can be blamed." An obscure little ditty they sing at Vassar about baths, among other things, includes this prophetic couplet: "When we grow older, then we'll be bolder/ We'll take it colder, up to the shoulder." Well, faced with global competition, it's time for more American managers to grow up, be bolder, and start taking the bad news straight from the shoulder. Indeed, to seek it out. To this end, the experts prescribe a number of techniques for avoiding the echo chamber. First, be exquisitely careful how you receive less-than-glad tidings. The news may make your blood boil or your hopes collapse, but you can't show it. No tirades, no tight-lipped sarcasm, no pushing back from the table, no eyes

rolling upward, no untoward body language of any sort. Instead, calm, even-tempered questions: "Can you tell me more about what happened?"

"What do you think we ought to do?" And finally, with a sincere smile if possible, "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Harry." Never ever shoot a messenger bearing bad news, on arrival or after the fact.

A boss genuinely interested in what his people have to say will not state his own opinion first. ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION, even if it entails disagreement among the folks or with you. Have the opposing sides blast away, secure in the knowledge that they need not take their differences personally -- no "Jane hates me"

or "The boss hates me." The point for everybody: What diplomats call a free and frank exchange of views usually leads to a better solution. For big decisions you may even want to put in place a formal system to make sure you hear all sides. This could be as simple as appointing someone as devil's advocate for the minority view: "I'm making it Jane's job to argue against this, so nobody get mad at her." Or as sophisticated as the dialectic practiced at Anheuser-Busch. When the policy committee of that company considers a major move -- getting into or out of a business, or making a big capital expenditure -- it sometimes assigns teams to make the case for each side of the question. There may be two teams or even three. Each is knowledgeable about the subject; each has access % to the same information. Occasionally someone in favor of the project is chosen to lead the dissent, and an opponent to argue for it. Pat Stokes, who heads the company's beer empire, describes the result: "We end up with decisions and alternatives we hadn't thought of previously," sometimes representing a synthesis of the opposing views. '

'You become a lot more anticipatory, better able to see what might happen, because you have thought through the process.' Another tip: Keep your personal staff to a minimum. Chamberlains and gatekeepers almost always end up filtering information. Make sure that the group of people who report to you directly includes at least a few independent minds. To accommodate them, you may have to tolerate considerable eccentricity and not a little unhappiness among the rest of the troops. ("Who does that stuck-up so-and-so think he is to mouth off like that?") What these wild ducks lack in interpersonal skills -- the main strength of the empty suit -- they more than make up for as straight-talking examples to others in the organization. And you can take steps to curb their occasional excesses without reining in their tongues. William Johnston, now executive in residence at Babson College, was CEO of a manufacturing company, part of the old Kidde Inc. conglomerate. A fairly outspoken sort himself, he says he always made it a point to tell a new subordinate the following story: "Before I was CEO, my predecessor used to say I was the biggest pain in the ass in the company. I'd go in and tell him, 'This is stupid.' He'd call me a pain, then pause and say, 'But most of the real progress in business was made by pains in the ass.' And we'd laugh." Subsequently, if Johnston's subordinate became a bit strident or insistent he would turn to him and say, "You know, you're being a real pain in the ass." And the two of them would laugh. Johnston also recommends a test to detect congenital yes people that is particularly useful to the exec plunked down among a new group of underlings: "If someone agrees with me on every point, I will sometimes over a period of two or three days change my position, subtly but clearly, and see if he still agrees with me. If he does, I'll tell him, 'You've done a 180-degree turn' and put it back in his lap." Then Johnston tries to figure out why the subordinate has been so amenable. "In many cases," he says, "they are just nice, agreeable, insecure people."

Outside formal meetings, work on being approachable. Avoid imperial trappings -- the cavernous office, the executive dining room, the dark- windowed limo. Establish regular times when people know they can come to see you. Better yet, go to their offices to talk to them. Take colleagues out for the occasional lunch or dinner, no agenda, just a little friendly "What's on your mind?" Use such bread-breaking as an opportunity to let down your hair and tell self-deprecating stories. Throughout these encounters, steadily monitor what management professor Samuel Certo of Rollins College calls your listening/talk ratio. Listening should dominate. Equally important: Respond in some way to what you hear, either by taking action or explaining to your interlocutor why you can't or won't right then. Realize, too, that constant executive busy-ness can impede communications just as effectively as a messenger summarily terminated. Psychologist Soder tells of one honcho so heavily booked that he couldn't take time to speak with two of his lieutenants, one of them a senior vice president, for three entire days. Sandy Weill, speaking for his top management team, enunciates the correct policy: "We will answer calls from people in our company before we answer calls from outside." Of course you want to manage by wandering around, getting out of the office to talk to people on the shop floor and in the most far-flung outposts of your corporate empire. But do it so that work doesn't stop dead when you appear and the far-flung outposts don't labor frantically to erect elaborate Potemkin villages for your visit. Make it routine and low key, so much so that your unannounced arrival elicits only a familiar greeting, not paroxysms of terror. TALK TO FOLKS high and low. Andrall Pearson tells of his policy as president of PepsiCo: On such a visit he'd often take to lunch not the branch chief but some hard-charger two or three rungs below him. Didn't such violation of the chain of command cause rumblings? No, Pearson says, because he told everybody in advance what he was doing and took care that no heads rolled as a result of conversations.

Finally, understand that much of the challenge lies in managing your own sense of yourself. As Harvard's Kotter observes: "The problem with people who are very successful is that they suffer ego expansion. It crushes everything in its path. It also becomes a wall." If you're to continue to be a successful manager, you have to keep smashing away at that wall so dissident murmurings can whisper their way through.