

Add Vulnerability to a Results-Oriented Enterprise and Produce Extraordinary Outcomes

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I ran a large community mediation agency for six years, with a mission to provide exceptional conflict resolution services throughout a broad metropolitan area. We partnered with the courts, state and local government, foundations, schools, and private organizations. Our agency provided direct mediation services to people of limited means in the courts, and also taught and trained hundreds of people every year in mediation and conflict management. Over the course of my time there we increased our operating budget by 30% and effectively expanded our programming to address critical community needs. I make these points upfront because once I start talking about vulnerability it's easy to forget that hard core results were always in focus.

There remains a strong perception that the field of conflict resolution requires “touchy feely” encounters. Before you even start talking about conflict resolution you can lose the attention of professionals who are focused on high performance. Conflict Resolution can be viewed as a beacon for soft output and ‘feel good’ interactions that carry no impact. But my career has been aimed at bringing the relevance of conflict resolution into extraordinary results. In my world, if the conflict resolution process does not meet quantifiable goals then it won't succeed. Saving time, money, increasing production, reducing delay and improving settlements are a few examples. At the same time, if the process does not build trust, engagement and connection, then strong results won't ever be fully achieved. A foot in both worlds is required.

When I started at my agency, I was convinced that hard work, discipline and rigorous goal setting would allow me to be an effective leader and take our organization to its next level of achievement. I was anxious to try out all the management and performance techniques I'd studied over the years and was determined to focus on recruiting and retaining good people, avoiding all the missteps I'd witnessed by leaders in my own career, and running the enterprise at an unprecedented level of success.

Coming out of the gate, my critical priorities were fundraising and refocusing our mission on a few crucial goals rather than trying to be all things to all people. It was critical to raise the organization's profile and expand the practical application of conflict resolution in our community. We needed to bring the place into the 21st century with technology advances and reenergize employee morale. The organization had been operating a vast number of programs without sufficient coherence and focus, new programs were launched without much design or planning, and they were using the exact same approaches to fundraising and profile building that had been used decades earlier.

As I set out to execute on my agenda, it became apparent that many of our production and planning meetings were flat and lifeless. People signaled agreement yet did not produce the needed follow-through action. People were not listening to or challenging and shaping each other's ideas in ways that allowed for shared commitment and passion. Pockets of extraordinary achievement were surrounded by a culture of resentment and complaint.

I became aware early on that telling the truth to myself about my own experience was crucial to moving the organization forward. In the course of a given day, there would be moments of overwhelm, uncertainty, frustration, and a recurring sense of being stuck and alone. There would also be moments of great excitement, innovation, curiosity and creativity. When I allowed myself to feel the truth in the moment about my own discomfort, the people around me started to move in different ways. I was shocked that something so subtle could have such a great impact around me.

The act of introducing vulnerability into high performance is tricky. These moments are easy to dismiss as "soft" and distracting. It's also easy to slip into unproductive complaint sessions where nothing gets resolved and no real movement occurs. If the vulnerability and authenticity are not in service of moving forward, then extraordinary results are not possible. When confronted with big problems, I started to notice that I would either hide and retreat or charge forward in a messianic attempt to repair and fix the situation. I became committed to bringing authenticity and vulnerability to that very moment – before the hiding or charging forward occurred.

When I was able to connect myself to the depth of the difficult experience for even a few seconds – without needing to fix or explain or protect myself – I found I had an untapped reservoir of energy and creativity for moving forward. This allowed me the strength to have difficult conversations with compassion and clarity. It permitted me to tell the truth to funders, board members and program partners about what wasn't working and where we were excelling. It gave me the courage to propose and fight for innovation and take big risks. These moments of vulnerability energized me to demand a level of honesty and excellence from our staff that was often times unreasonable.

Gradually, as we found ways of bringing more authentic and vulnerable conversation into the organization, we found we had more room to discuss the dreams and visions that people shared for creating an extraordinary, cohesive, core strength organization. We were more and more able to identify what we did brilliantly and what needed to go. There was more courage to effectively say "no" to programs that didn't fit, to end partnerships that were no longer working, and to build new programs that were responsive to our mission and urgent community needs.

When I didn't allow the truth to bubble up to my own surface, I would dig into a place of isolation and defensiveness, more concerned about appearances, protecting myself, and maintaining the status quo rather than with building something extraordinary. I learned that the energy of my own vision and the miracle of activating those around me always stood waiting after these moments of vulnerability passed. This is not an endorsement for running around sharing your deepest feelings with those who haven't asked and don't care. While the act of bringing vulnerability and authenticity to high performance is more often a very quiet, internal process, the

creativity, connection and energy that follow are well worth the momentary discomfort of exposure.