

Openness — The Grand Simplifier

An Edited Excerpt from *The Human Element*

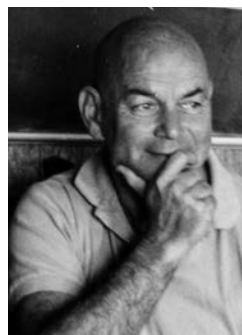
Will Schutz

Telling the truth sounds like a good idea. It has been espoused for millennia. But most people do not believe in it for an instant, and they make their way through this contradiction by inventing euphemisms and rationales for lying: tact, diplomacy, white lies, business is business, spin control, and being realistic. Manners and protocol systems discourage self-disclosure: "Act in the prescribed way, whether or not you really feel like it." Lack of truth telling is even justified with a bit of moralizing: "Don't hurt people's feelings." Even as truth is espoused, the implication is that withholding and distorting are the preferred forms of communication. Society reinforces lying and the idea that human beings are too weak to deal with the truth. But wherever the Human Element workshop has been tried and deeper levels of truth have been reached, it has become quite clear that people can handle far more truth than is generally believed, and with very profitable results.

The current, ongoing controversy over ethics and credibility in organizations is really an issue of truth or openness. After years of tolerating distortion and secrecy in all aspects of organizational life—governmental, religious, corporate—the public is becoming more alert to and intolerant of such behavior. With the resurrection of the truth principle in organizations, ethical deficiencies may be greatly reduced, and organizations may become more profitable, more fair, and more pleasant to work in. The breakthrough in this area is twofold. First, many old clichés turn out to be absolutely correct. The truth does set me free—orga-

nizationally, interpersonally, personally, and bodily. Second, the tools and techniques—specifically, feedback, imagery, and understanding of the body—are available to test the effects of self-disclosure and of withholding on the body, on relationships, and on performance in organizations. When I am open, my body feels good. Distortion or withholding expresses itself in my body as some form of discomfort—shortness of breath, neck pain, tightness in the stomach, sweaty palms, a dry throat, a headache—and expresses itself as well by creating distance in relationships, loss of motivation, burnout, illness, absenteeism, and declining productivity on the job. The more open I am, the healthier I am. As I become more alert to how much I pay for lying and withholding, in terms of energy, health, and mental clarity, I open myself to the possibility of an atmosphere of greater truth.

Truth telling is probably the single most cost-effective and simplest way to make major leaps in organizational productivity and worker satisfaction. But many people in organizations find the prospect of increased truth telling ridiculous: "If I ever told people, especially my boss, what I really think of them, I would be long gone." That's probably correct if truth telling, as is commonly thought, means name



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calling—saying what someone else (like a boss) is really like, and if the message is negative. We often turn to tact: “If the message is conveyed in a softened, sensitive, politically astute manner, I can tell my boss what I want without getting fired.” Being tactful often means shading the truth, so that it is not quite as clear to the listener as it is to the speaker.


A key vehicle for resolving arguments is self-awareness. Unfortunately, however, the practice of arguing vehemently about issues that are irrelevant to the real feelings is widespread. The most effective way of breaking through such impasses is to acquire more self-awareness and be willing to express it to others. Withholding, lying, distorting, and “softening” the truth are not necessary. When an organization establishes an atmosphere of truth and openness, every disagreement is looked upon as a problem to be solved, not as an opportunity to assign blame or to be right.

The truth does set me free— organizationally, interpersonally, personally, and bodily

Openness as a model for teamwork is a radical notion. Typical organizations do not often reward openness and self-insight. They are more likely to foster such behavior as denial and “spin control,” as well as a general strategy of my getting what I want from people without their knowing what I have done. To reveal a weakness, or to tell you directly how I feel about you, is a rare and often risky act.

Yet it does work, often magically. If I want to improve teamwork, I must know all the human factors blocking it and then remove them by getting them out in the open for the whole team to see and deal with. I can then enlist the abilities of the entire team to create a solution that incorporates all these factors, including satisfying the feelings that created them.

Open teamwork has proved to be the key that unlocks a great productivity surge. It has resulted in decreased time to market, greatly reduced time required for meetings, more efficient and satisfying working conditions resulting in higher motivation, greater union-management cooperation, and increased profitability. For example, the “traditional packing start-up curve—the time between the concept and full production—is about 22 months....The in-case fill start-up at Baltimore [using the Human Element approach] took about 4 months. This saved the company...\$9 million compared to the average start-up.” Or, as another client reported, “Union and plant leadership attended the [Human Element] workshop in the fall. Two weeks after the workshop the union and the company signed an unprecedented amendment to the current contract.... Both the union and plant leadership attribute the success of the negotiations...to the workshop. Headquarters was prepared to shut down the plant if there was no signed agreement.”

Sometimes the notion of openness throughout an organization seems highly unrealistic and impractical. But why dismiss the possibility of openness without a thorough investigation, since it has so much potential for solving so many organizational problems? The Human Element model can be seen as an ideal toward which any organization can strive. The model works best when you and I are open and honest with each other. I may feel cautious the first time I try the Human Element approach, but if management is consistently trustworthy, the atmosphere of truth grows very rapidly. Then the excitement of the new way of relating, as well as the effectiveness of the new methods, will become the main responses. 

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