

## THE BRIGHT SIDE<sup>®</sup> OF CHANGE

Written by Donna Rae Smith

### Handling the Truth

Even if you never saw the movie *A Few Good Men*, you've probably heard the oft-quoted exchange between the characters played by Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson: "I want the truth!" "You can't handle the truth!"

So, can *you* handle the truth? Many of us say we can, and claim we want our direct reports to be honest with us. But when push comes to shove, are we really open to honest feedback?

Jamie says this about her boss: "He always says he doesn't want his employees to be "yes men", that he wants us to be honest, and push back when needed. But whenever I've tried to talk about the things that aren't going well, I get stonewalled. He's not receptive to hearing the tough criticisms. His instinct is to get defensive, or even angry. So, over time, I just stopped trying."

As we move up the echelons of our organizations, we're often less likely to get feedback on our performance, whether it's because, as in Jamie's case, our employees believe we aren't open to it, or simply because they don't want to take the risk of confronting the boss. And yet the people working for us usually have the best view of our performance. We stand to learn from them, if we're willing.

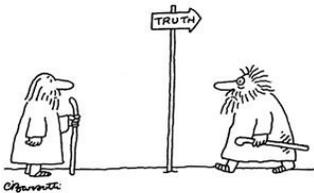
If you aren't already doing it, how can you prepare yourself to hear the truth? The first step is to recognize that we always have room to grow. Reaching a certain level in your career is a sign of achievement, and success. But it doesn't mean that you should stop seeking your own professional and personal growth. Perhaps you've heard the Bruce Barton quote, "When you're through changing, you're through." There are always opportunities to acquire new knowledge, and better skills. Reject the notion that asking for feedback makes you weak. On the contrary, receptivity to feedback is a mark of confidence, and demonstrates a desire to keep improving your performance, and the company's.

One of the key promoters of honesty is trust. You won't receive honesty from your employees if they don't trust you. They need to be absolutely confident that there won't be negative repercussions for opening up. A global client of ours, after long and hard work on this issue, is now at the point where they are getting real honest input from



staff. In the past, employees understood, from the actions of management, that unwelcome information—including safety incidents—shouldn't be reported. Simply, no one at the top wanted to deal with negative information. Everyone was afraid that giving or getting critical feedback would only serve to harm their careers. Luckily that mindset has now changed, although convincing staff that the culture is truly different—one where the exchange of information is necessary and healthy—hasn't happened overnight. Building essential trust takes time.

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## The Experiment

Here are few steps to start the process of soliciting sincere feedback from your staff.

- 1. Be specific.** If you're daunted by where to begin, or worried you'll receive feedback that isn't useful, then be specific. Isolate specific areas that you want feedback on, and pose questions that will elicit precise answers. This [McKinsey Quarterly](#) article highlights some great case studies of executives who took critical measures to improve performance and how they went about it.
- 2. Be prepared to listen.** Hard though it may be—especially in the beginning—prepare to listen. When faced with critiques, we're often inclined to get defensive, or justify ourselves. We want to distance ourselves from what's being said. It's critical to resist that urge. As [this CEO](#) points, if you become defensive in the face of honest feedback, people won't want to talk to you.

**THE CONVERSATION:** Share the results of your experiment in the comments below or contact the author directly at [donnarae@bright-side.com](mailto:donnarae@bright-side.com).

### ABOUT DONNA RAE SMITH

Donna Rae Smith is a guest blogger for Smart Business. She has forged a career, enterprise and an applied discipline on the practice of teaching leaders to be masters of change. She is the Founder and CEO of Bright Side, Inc., a transformational change catalyst company with an emphasis on the behavior-side of change. For more than two decades, Donna Rae Smith and the Bright Side team have been recognized as innovators in executing behavioral strategies coalesced with business strategies to accelerate and sustain business results. Bright Side®, The Behavioral Strategy Company, has partnered with over 250 of the world's most influential companies. For more information, please visit [www.bright-side.com](http://www.bright-side.com) or contact Donna Rae at [donnarae@bright-side.com](mailto:donnarae@bright-side.com).

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