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## **ARTICLE** **LEADERSHIP**

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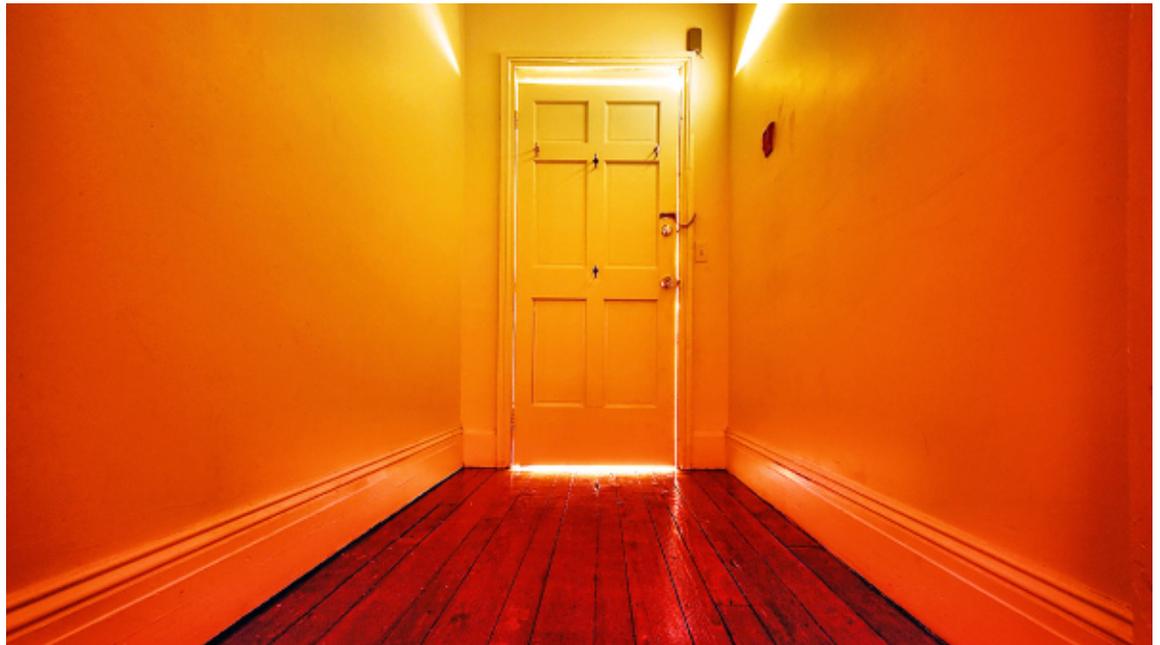
*by Megan Reitz and John Higgins*

LEADERSHIP

# The Problem with Saying “My Door Is Always Open”

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If you are in an influential position, you have probably said words to the effect of “My door is always open.” You likely meant this declaration very genuinely. You might well feel that you are a pretty approachable sort of person and that others feel comfortable coming to you with their issues and their ideas.

This may be true.

But it probably isn't.

Leaders often have an inflated idea of how easy it is for others to speak honestly to them. Our [two-year research study](#), including interviews with over 60 senior executives, as well as workshops and case studies, illuminates a glaring blind spot: We simply don't appreciate how risky it can feel for others to speak up.

This is because, if we are in a powerful position, we often take power for granted. As a member of a privileged in-group, we forget what it is like to be in the less privileged out-group.

Consider the phrase "My door is always open." It contains a number of assumptions. First, people should meet you on your territory, rather than the other way around. Second, you have the luxury of a door. Third, you can choose when to close or open it.

These details are small but important. Organizational systems contain many subtle codes that encourage employees to conform. Perhaps the most obvious, one that breeds considerable cynicism, is when a powerful person tells people to challenge him...and then punishes those who do. Sam Goldwyn, the legendary American film producer, referred to this when he famously said: "I don't want any yes-men around me. I want everybody to tell me the truth even if it costs them their job."

This seeming contradiction is alive and well in leaders today. When we interviewed the CEO of a global company, she enthusiastically agreed, saying, "I want people to be who they are." Barely pausing for breath, she went on to explain, "But I do have a little list in my head of people who don't fit."

Most of us are pretty good at sensing danger. We know whether the person we are speaking to "has a little list," and we sensibly stay silent. Such silence is a dangerous thing for any organization and any leader.

We know all the dangers of silence. If your employees are full of ideas about how you can do a better job for the customer, or get a better deal from a supplier, you need to know. If people cannot speak up to you, then you will be unaware of issues that could bring your team, your targets, and even your organization to its knees. An examination of the emissions scandal at VW, the retail account scandal at Wells Fargo, and numerous others is testament to how that can play out in the extreme.

For leaders, none of this is, or should be, news. Most leaders know they need to be more accessible, more conversational. And so executives agree to take part in the Friday-lunchtime-pizza-with-the-team sessions and say again and again that "My door is always open." Then they wonder (occasionally with some relief) why people aren't coming through it very often.

So how do you, as a leader, acknowledge power differences and *genuinely* encourage others to speak up to you? Our research suggests that you need to ask questions in five areas:

**First, are you *honestly* interested in other people’s opinions?** And if you are, whose opinions are you most interested in hearing, and whose are you biased against? What data do you listen to most, and what are you largely deaf to (financial data, data about people, emotions)? Being genuinely curious about other perspectives requires a humility that can be in short supply as you head up the organizational hierarchy. As the CEO of one company admitted to us, “I expect that my ego sometimes prevents me hearing stuff I should be listening to.” Before you conclude that you are sure you don’t have a problem in this area, it is useful to check by asking yourself, “How do I *know* that I have a reputation for being open to changing my mind?”

**Second, have you considered how risky it feels for others to speak up to you?** You can investigate this more deeply by reflecting on how you tend to respond when challenged by people. It may well be that on the previous 10 occasions you received challenge with interest and admirable attentiveness, but on the eleventh you’d had a bad day and just couldn’t stop yourself from interrupting and grumpily disagreeing with the person. The eleventh occasion is the story everyone will tell around the office. And that story is the one that will live on for years. And it probably *is* the case that you judge people when they speak up (which is simply human), and it probably *is* the case that you also happen to be the one who determines the result of their performance appraisals. So it is *you* who will need to be extra vigilant of the signals you are sending out when someone has built up the courage to speak up. And you have to apologize publicly when you have a bad day (as everyone does) and cut somebody off at the knees.

**Third, how aware are you of the political game being played?** Politics is an inherent part of organizational life; personal agendas play out all the time in what we choose to say to one another. This is especially the case when you occupy an influential role. As one of our interviewees put it, “When they hear you’re the CEO...they say what they think you want to hear, which can be very frustrating.” Enabling others to speak up means understanding why this person might be saying what they are saying (or why they are staying silent) and making an informed choice about whether to surface that agenda, whether to gently lower the stakes so the person speaks up, or whether to widen the circle of individuals you listen to and include those less concerned with “playing the game.”

**Fourth, what labels do people apply to you, and what labels do you apply to others that define the rules of what can be said?** When we meet with others, we label them, consciously or unconsciously. For example, we badge others as “CEO,” “consultant,” “woman,” “young,” “new,” or “sales,” and these labels mean different things to different people in different contexts. But inevitably they are all markers of status, and status governs the unwritten rules around who can speak and who gets heard. Seeing unwritten advantage in action is not easy, particularly if you are fortunate enough to be in the in-group, but it does not mean we shouldn’t strive to become more aware and to mitigate any detrimental influence this labelling might have.

**Finally, what specifically do you need to do and say to enable others to speak?** This might include anything: reducing status difference by choosing to dress more casually, introducing a “red card” at executive committee meetings to ensure someone has the ability to challenge you, or carefully

holding your tendency for extraversion in check so that others get a moment to speak up. These tactics can only be built on a solid foundation of self-awareness, informed by the responses to the four questions above.

If you are wondering why others aren't speaking up more, first ask yourself how you are inadvertently silencing them.

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