

Why You Don't Find Out What You Need to Know

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Imagine this. You're pensive. Your wife (or husband) notices you concentrating deeply and asks, "What are you thinking about?"

You answer vacantly, "Nothing." She (or he) chooses not to push any further and leaves you to your thoughts.

Have you just lied? I realize that's a strong accusation for what just happened. You probably wouldn't choose that word to describe the incident. If your spouse had pushed you, you might explain that nothing you were considering was worth explaining just now. The ideas you were examining might be worth sharing later, once they were more cohesive, but not right now.

Or maybe it would be really hard to put all your thoughts into words. Further, maybe you're not sure exactly where you're headed with these thoughts. You may be surprised at how some of the thoughts had come into your mind.

You might feel embarrassed that you're not engaged in something more productive. Maybe you wonder if this is the best use of your time. Maybe you don't want to expose your thoughts to the scrutiny of your spouse just yet.

Those may all be valid reasons for not sharing your thoughts. The truth is, however, that you really were deeply deliberating. Whatever the reason might be, you chose not to communicate with your spouse at that exact moment. It's not an unusual scenario, is it?

Now, let me ask you to change roles. Imagine yourself as the inquisitive one, asking people who see you function every day, "What are your thoughts about my work?" You'd like to obtain their feedback, learning what impact you have on them. But when you ask for their thoughts, what you get is "Nothing."

Does anyone in your organization offer you deeply thoughtful feedback? You are blessed if you have such a relationship! Most of the members of your team probably don't share what they are thinking about you as a leader. Is it malicious? Are they intentionally withholding information that might be helpful to you?

I doubt it's deliberate. I think more often than not, it's similar to the scenario I described at the beginning of this article. Folks have thoughts, but maybe they think there will be a better time later to share their observations. Or maybe they imagine it will be hard to put a description of your impact into words that will be meaningful to you.

Maybe they'd like to offer some observations, but they're not sure what repercussions their comments might generate. Perhaps they are surprised that their thoughts are as passionate (or negative, or even affirming) as they are. Maybe they think you won't (or can't) change or aren't really interested in hearing their perspectives. Perhaps they have doubts that their observations are legitimate.

These comments could apply to anyone, of course. But it seems to me that leaders like you have more trouble than anyone else when it comes to receiving candid feedback. And yet, the higher you move up the hierarchy, the more critically you need that kind of information.

Some individuals may fear your wrath, not wanting to be seen as a bearer of bad news. Some prefer to lay low and be good citizens, just doing their job well (and they consider that giving you feedback is not part of their job).

Isn't it ironic that in a society where freedom of speech is so highly valued, we won't share specific information that might help our leaders improve their skills? Oh, sure--teammates talk with each other, but so often, no one shares the information with you, the one person who could use it productively.

So, what do you do if you want to learn what they know? You have to ask, over and over again. In addition, you have to create an environment that is safe. Even if you ask, people won't provide their perspectives if your response is aggressive toward them or even an apparent rejection of their expressed experience.

Further, folks have to see that you are doing something with the information. If you appear to ignore the information, folks will stop sharing. You're much better off if you act on the information, report back to folks what you are doing and why, and then ask again later for additional comments. You actually gain credibility and commitment to your success if you share your progress (and appreciation for their insights) with the people who have helped you.

Individuals are willing to help you grow, but the initiative and the creation of a healthy environment for seeking that information is strictly up to you! Don't settle for silence any longer. Go ask! But be gentle in doing so!