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Leading With Openness and Transparency

In this column, I explore the themes of openness and transparency and their relationship to trust, a concept central to the leadership process. I believe that leaders succeed when they communicate with candor, let people see how they make their decisions, allow challenge, and account for weaknesses in their neutrality, objectivity or situation awareness.

At the time of this writing, the National Aeronautical and Space Agency (NASA) remains under intense investigation and scrutiny over the tragic loss of the Space Shuttle Columbia and its crew of seven Astronauts.

NASA's post-disaster behavior provides us with an instructive example of the openness and transparency that I find critical to effective leadership. Consider what we know about the accident at the time of this writing, just one day short of a month after the Columbia's loss.

- ◆ We know the actions of NASA flight controllers before, during and immediately after the loss of Columbia, it is all on tape and those tapes have been released to the media.
- ◆ The Columbia experienced a mechanical failure on launch when insulating foam dropped from the booster's fuel tank and struck the Columbia's wing.
- ◆ A group of veteran Boeing engineers has claimed that their company, using a team of engineers inexperienced in these circumstances, failed in their damage analysis.
- ◆ Internal e-mail shows that NASA engineers and staff, concerned about damage to the Columbia and critical of NASA's damage analysis, predicted the possibility of the Columbia's re-entry disaster. We also know that these e-mails never reached top NASA officials and did not improve the situation awareness of decision makers or influence their decision-making.
- ◆ In May of 2000, NASA officials altered the return and descent path of the space shuttle Atlantis over concerns of damage to heat

resistant tiles, one of the very issues being investigated in the Columbia accident.

- ◆ The Columbia underwent a major overhaul in 2001, including refitting some components and systems now being investigated.
- ◆ NASA remains skeptical about the insulation strike damage hypothesis, and continues to analyze numerous other alternative theories.
- ◆ Preliminary analysis concludes that a “plasma breach” occurred in the Columbia’s left wing before the shuttle’s catastrophic failure and NASA is focusing its investigation the left wing of the shuttle.
- ◆ Searchers have found parts and pieces of the space shuttle that may hold the key to NASA’s investigation.
- ◆ NASA Administrator Sean O’Keefe acknowledges that NASA officials could have made judgment errors.

In a recent National Public Radio interview, Dr. Diane Vaughn, said that in regard to the Columbia disaster, NASA has “built trust with the public by being honest and open.” Vaughn added that this openness “sets a good tone for the rest of the investigation.” In her comments, she also drew a clear distinction between NASA’s current willingness to discuss evidence and the NASA reaction to the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986, when they attempted to hide their decision process and actions.

Dr. Vaughn is a Boston College sociologist, and author of *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture and Deviance at NASA*. Longtime readers of *Wildfire* will recall Dr. Vaughn’s article, appearing on these pages in March of 1997, in which she compared causes of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster with wildland firefighting.

Look past NASA’s high-tech, space exploration mission to understand that the space agency and fire organizations share similarities. Most readers of *Wildfire* either lead, or will lead, people in organizations expected to carry out their mission in complicated, unclear, high tempo and inherently risky environments. Whether you lead a group of people, other leaders or an entire organization, leaders seeking success in the wildland fire environment must understand what we know from successful organizations working in other high-risk occupations - the importance of the organization’s ability to resist error.

However, we must also understand that error resistance is not something we can externally pump into a group of people. Error resistance is an

outcome, the product of a learning organization and cohesive teams. Anyone who has actually led understands that organizational learning, teamwork and unit cohesion require trust between people, and that trust can only develop when people are communicating.

Put simply, communication is the foundation of trust, trust is the foundation of cohesion, and cohesion is the foundation of error resistance. This equation presents the leader with a daunting task, one we commonly think of as “teambuilding.” The potential leader will find this task nearly impossible if they do not account for the changing nature of our workforce. Today, as evidenced by the Columbia tragedy, people demand accountability. They want to know how and why we made a decision and they ask for evidence. People want to participate in decisions, and they demand our accountability to the decision. They expect the leader to talk to them. In successful error resistant organizations, people get to do these things.

Contrast NASA’s Columbia investigation with investigations of fatal wildland fires. Wildland fire investigations leave too many unanswered questions, too much doubt, too little satisfaction for many firefighters to willingly and enthusiastically change their behavior based on the recommendations that flow from the investigation. For example, almost nine years after the incident, we still must ask ourselves if we will ever *really* know why a key member of the South Canyon investigation team refused to sign the final investigation report. Today, many in the fire community wonder why some firefighters have reacted with resentment and anger to the attempts of the U.S. Forest Service to hold people accountable for their actions relating to the Thirtymile fire, even though the fire community has been crying for accountability for at least ten years.

No one should interpret these comments as an attack on the competence, credibility or sincerity of the individuals who conducted those investigations. They labored within a cautious, bureaucratic system that prevents frankness, open communication and transparency. Consequently, people inside and outside the agencies do not universally trust the outcomes. People will say “well, what about the victims, what about the families, what about the agency’s liability? We cannot communicate openly about investigations!” Again, contrast with the Columbia investigation, a circumstance facing all the same issues on mega-scale as well as issues of national security, politics and continued congressional funding.

In her comments to NPR, Diane Vaughn pointed out the downside of this kind of candor, that being people’s desire for quick answers and their tendency to speculate, jump to conclusions and second-guess. However, she also predicted that, despite this negative aspect, NASA would

ultimately benefit from their efforts to build trust. When we communicate, when we lead with openness and candor people get on-board. When the final decision is made, people will have been part of the voyage, and I believe most strongly, that people's participation in decision-making is the key to their commitment.

Biography

Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently completing a master's degree in organizational leadership. He can be reached at info@guidancegroup.org

In the modern organizational environment, leadership will increasingly require communicating with candor, openness and transparent decision-making. In this emerging work world, successful leaders will increasingly show where they got their information, how they analyzed the situation and how they make their decisions. They will allow challenge, and expect to account for their weaknesses in neutrality, objectivity or situational awareness.