

Hearing Voices – The seeds of fear, doubt and mistrust

"People are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them." - Epictetus

The single most important building block of successful relationships at work (and at home and play) is trust. Without trust, relationships are put in jeopardy and people disengage, pull back, and resist connecting. Without trust, people feel unsafe – physically, emotionally, mentally, or psychologically.

Mistrust is a fact of life in many workplaces. Does mistrust originate in the workplace? No. Mistrust in the workplace is a consequence of experiences individuals have long before entering the workplace. Mistrust is brought to the workplace; it does not originate in the workplace.

The voices we heard then

We are not born with a natural sense of distrusting others. However, long before we could spell "workplace", the seeds of fear, doubt and mistrust were subconsciously planted in our minds, in our psyches by our parents and other caregivers when we were very young. In the early stages of life, during the developmental process from birth to age seven, we absorbed the seeds of doubt, fear and mistrust. They were nurtured by the voices we heard – voices that communicated to us, in various ways, shapes and form, that:

"You are not good."

"You are not wanted."

"You are not loved for who you are."

"You are not seen for who you are."

"Your needs are a problem."

"Your needs are not important."

"You are not safe."

"You will not be taken care of."

"You will be betrayed."

"Your presence does not matter."

These messages may not have been delivered in these exact words. However, the messages took the form of statements and behaviors that otherwise dismissed us, made us feel small, invisible and unseen, negated and ridiculed our efforts, our creations, our imaginations, our ideas, our thoughts, our beliefs, our interests, our aliveness, our juiciness, our silence, even our individuality.

The many positive voices we so wanted to hear, so needed to hear as children - the opposite of the voices in the above list - were often lacking or seldom heard. For many of us, the voices we heard were so often negative that to this day, when we hear someone call our name, we react in a "startled" way, fearing something negative or fearing another admonition that says we are "bad" or "wrong" – messages that are at the heart of our most basic fear, doubt and mistrust.

The voices we hear now

Read each of the statements in the list above. Examine your interactions of today, the past week, past month, six months or past year and see if you can pinpoint events or circumstances at work (or at home or play) where you interpreted and reacted to someone else's words or behavior as one of these messages. After reflection, follow your story to ascertain the "truth" of your interpretation or reactivity. In other words, did the other person(s) actually mean, for example, that you are "not good", "not wanted", "not seen for who you are", "do not matter" or are "bad" or "wrong" in some way?

Experience shows that our interpretations of the messages we hear (read, etc.) are most often subjective, and judgmental and, in fact, are most often "stories" we make up - not having dug deeper to explore the truth of our interpretation. When we move to fear, doubt and mistrust of others, our "story" is usually the cause. The question is, "Is my story accurate?"

Experiencing our "family" at work

Organizational psychologists have long told us that "we bring our family to work" – that many of our psycho-social-emotional dynamics which we exhibit at work reflect our "stuff" – feelings, emotions, behaviors that we initially experienced in the company of our immediate and extended family when we were growing up. Only now, in the present, real-time, we unconsciously react to our colleagues, bosses, direct reports and others at work who push our buttons as "our family" who pushed our buttons then. We project our childhood fear, doubts and mistrust on to current individuals.

Based on our internalized beliefs, we then walk into the workplace perhaps feeling small, invisible, unworthy, unimportant, insecure, unsure, a potential liability/problem, unsafe, stupid, incompetent, mistrusting and on and on. And, why wouldn't we? If we've not done any personal work to explore the nature of our feelings of unworthiness and deficiency, our fears, doubts and mistrust, well, that's what our antennae and radar are looking for. It's our wiring. We turn the radio dial in our heads to "vigilance" and allow our preconditioned dispositions of fear, doubt and mistrust to direct our workplace lives.

So as we feared, doubted and mistrusted then, we come to the workplace consciously or unconsciously armed to fear, doubt and mistrust now. When we hear the oral or written voices of those who we feel are attacking us today, we are really hearing the voices of those who surrounded us as we were growing up.

"Do not abandon trust when your ego thinks things should be different than they are." - Wayne Dyer

The antidote to fear, doubt and mistrust

When we observe and watch our reactivity - our fear, our doubt and mistrust – there are six steps we can take to discern whether our fear, doubt and mistrust are justifiable or not, and take action to move towards being trusting and building trusting and healthy relationships.

1. Uncouple - when one experiences a sense of fear or doubt, it can be helpful to ask if the feeling, emotion or sensation is "familiar", that is, whether this seems like an "old" feeling or belief that arises again and again. Telling one's self, "That was then; this is now" in the immediate moment can support one to uncouple (mentally, emotionally and psychologically) from old conscious or unconscious attachments to one's family. In this instance, one can then choose to view the current individual(s) in a fresh light, in a way that is detached from a habitual pattern of (family-related) reactivity and allows one to take a deep breath, see the other as a separate and distinct individual and engage in a "right-here, right-now" relationship that has no history.
2. Discern the "rest of the story" – when we tell ourselves a story about the other(s) that results in fear, doubt and mistrust, it's helpful if we look to discover the rest of the story, that is, ask the other if the story we are telling ourselves is accurate. Saying something like, "I'm having this reaction to what you said/wrote and it's bothering me and I want to check it out with you" can go a long way in both clarifying the accuracy of your reactivity, your story, and engendering a trusting relationship.
3. Forgive others - if someone spoke in a way that was hurtful to you. Forgiving is not condoning their behavior. It is, however, a mental and emotional way to move beyond resentment which, over time, can cause deep stress and upset that leads to dis-ease and illness on many levels. Healing occurs when we choose to give up our bitterness, resentment and anger. Remember that resentment is like taking a drug and waiting for the other person to die.

4. Explore - your childhood history around issues of doubt, fear, betrayal and trust in an effort to see how your issues around trust are "learned behaviors" that you have carried with you throughout your life's journey. See if you can observe where and when you "project" your fear, doubt and mistrust on to others and whether your projections are justified or, more probably, are "knee-jerk" programmed reactions.
5. Speak with others – whom you trust and support and air your feelings. Sometimes this dialogue can help you uncover "blind spots" and areas that are non-apparent when you are mulling things over in your head and help you gain greater clarity on an issue or feeling. Be sure those with whom you speak are good listeners who respect you, can hear you and don't feel the need to jump in, fix you, educate you, teach you, interrogate you, or hijack your experience. This dialogue will allow you to express feelings which, if kept inside (i.e, buried alive), can only serve to rise up again and rear their ugly head, often leading to feelings of paralysis, hopelessness and helplessness that fuel fear, doubt and mistrust.
6. Empathize – when you are critiquing, disagreeing or pushing back on someone. Remember that everyone has limitations and blockages around trust, (i.e, their "stuff") and communicating with empathy, understanding and compassion will go a long way in forging healthy and positive relationships - even when you disagree.

It's good to remember that we are all a product of our upbringing and that the way someone relates to you is often not about you. Another's fears, doubts and mistrust, like yours, are more often than not projections they put on you, and if you are caught in an unconscious reaction - you on them. Most often, even though we are "adults", we perceive other adults through the lens of the child we once were and cast them according to the recognizable characters of our historical, familial story.

The voices of fear, doubt and mistrust with which we communicate to others, and these voices of others who communicate with us are colored by the past.

Understanding these voices and how they sow the seeds of fear, doubt and mistrust allows the possibility of communicating as who we really are, in the moment, right here and right now, and invites open, honest and mature interactions that bring us greater psycho-social-emotional well-being and authenticity.

So, some self-reflective questions are:

- What can you do to increase your trust? What will you do?
- Can you identify and eliminate blockages to trust, most notably your fears?
- Who and what do you trust? Are fear and doubt much of the fabric of who you are?
- How did you learn to fear, doubt and mistrust as you were growing up? Was it a healthy sense of fear, doubt and mistrust or was it a defensive, reactive sense of fear, doubt and mistrust?
- Are you seen or known as a "doubting Thomas"?
- Do you often doubt yourself? Judge yourself? Mistrust yourself?
- Do you take criticism, constructive feedback and push-back personally? Why?
- Can you see your "family" in others? How so?
- Do folks ever say you remind them of a member of their family?
- Can you envision a life where you are freer from fear, doubt and mistrust? What one baby step could you take this week to move you closer to that vision?

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