

On Leadership: The Scourge of the Yes-Men

Periodically I like to remind everybody that in the ways of the organization I'm older than old. If I haven't heard it all, I've probably heard a variation on the theme – no matter what the theme might be.

But one of my favorites – and has been for years – invariably appears during that first meeting with a client when the Chief Executive or Chairman says, "I don't want to hear the same crap from you that I've heard from others. I'm not interested in how good I am or how great my company is. That's not why I'm hiring you. I've paid too many consultants too much money over the years who gave me the same garbage. I already know what I know and I don't need you to stroke my ego. It won't do you any good. What I want you to do is tell me the truth, tell me what I need to know and tell me what I need to do about it. Otherwise you're wasting my time and my money."

That's fair and fully understandable. Only when I do exactly what they ask – tell them the truth – it's the last thing they're prepared to hear.

A particular high point was when I was discussing the results of an assessment I had performed for one of my clients. I was meeting with their truly excellent Chief Executive and going over the details. He lost all color in his face, leaned back in his chair and blew out a deep breath before he could speak. His first words were: "It's like having your dirty laundry hung out for everybody to see."

Maybe. But it was the information he needed – and the information he asked for. It may not have been pretty, but it was necessary and someone had to say it. I did – and once he got over the shock – we got to work.

Fast forward a few months. I'm sitting in a meeting with that same executive. We'd done wonderful work and were seeing real, substantive results. All the issues identified were if not already fixed, well in progress. Success was coming in the form of money and morale. He was ecstatic – and then he offered me a job. It was a really good job with all the salary and perks I could have asked for. A very generous offer and I was flattered that he asked.

But, as I have with every other client who has ever offered me a job, I answered exactly the same way. After thanking him politely, I said, "Think about the way I talk to you. The things I say and how I say them. I'm not going to change that just because I'm an employee. I'm going to do exactly the same thing I do now. So. Do you still want to offer me the job?"

And the answer I get is always the same. It starts with a slightly embarrassed expression, a little laugh and then, "No."

That was no surprise to me. It never is – because for all that executives know they want and need to hear the truth, too many executives are surrounded by yes-men. Those ubiquitous corporate spongers who make their careers by saying just what they believe their executive wants to hear.

Whether out of fear or simply because they think it will help them climb the corporate ladder all the faster, they say the 'right' thing, rather than the necessary thing. Sometimes they even hide the crucial information for fear that it will help them on their way down rather than up.

And don't think for a moment that in our world of faster, leaner, younger, technologically-savvy, meritocratic, team-based, non-hierarchical organizations with open-door, open-cube, no walled, open communication systems that it's any different. Someone is at the top. Someone else wants to move in that direction. They think the answer is to say 'yes.'

Yes-men wanna-bes (and keep in mind that what those yes-men wanna-bes want is to be sitting in your chair) watch your face, listen to your voice, notice whether and when you're tapping your pen, read between the lines of your emails, see how you're taking down another employee at any level at any time, what you like, how you take your coffee/tea/alcoholic beverage of choice every minute of every day. They know what you like to eat and how you order it. They get close to your secretary – or as close as they can – to find out what you're doing, when, and with whom.

You are as good as a post-doctoral study as far as they're concerned. Because only by studying you will they miss the missteps made by others. They'll nail what you like and how you like it so fast you won't even know you're getting the party line when you're getting it. Men or women – because they come in both genders – the yes-men will figure out how to use you to meet their own ends.

Because they'll also learn how you like to get your confounding, alternate opinions. They'll learn how to tell you what you want to hear even as they are, ostensibly, telling you bad news.

They have one customer – you – and they're selling to you every day of the week. Because if you like them – if you think that they are 'just like you' - chances are you'll move them up the organizational ladder all the faster. And then, when they change companies – which they will when they've gotten all they can out of you, they'll do the same study of their new boss and repeat the process.

And what do you get? A seemingly committed employee you think is telling you the things you need to hear. The hard things. The honest things. The things you know you need to know but so rarely find people who are willing to tell you. Somehow, this person – this yes-man – is the one who 'gets' you and what you want. You think they're on your side. You think they're as committed to the organization's success as you are.

You're wrong. They're not. They're committed to their own success at the cost of anyone and anything that might get in their way – including you. What they 'get' is how to move up as fast as they possibly can.

Oddly enough, though, what they tend not to get is when it's being done to them. They've done it but they don't see it. Too bad. Those are the breaks. Because when it happens to them, it usually means that they're being ousted by a young Turk who figured things out faster – including who to play on the Board to make their way into the executive suite as quickly as possible. But you don't have to worry about that. That's their problem.

Instead, let's concentrate on what you do.

Take a few minutes after your meetings with everyone on your team and think about the dynamics of what went on. How honest was the person with whom you met? What information did you get? What information didn't you get? What did the person dance around? How direct were they when they were telling you something neither of you wanted to hear – but both of you needed to know? When you challenged them, how did they respond? What did they tell you? What didn't they tell you?

Then think about the part you play in all of this. If there are yes-men around you it's because you've sent out the message that you want to be soft-soaped. Somehow you sent the message you want an entourage – not an executive team.

And that's on you – because if they're there, you're supporting them in one way or another. So first you change you. You start asking the hard ones and not accepting anything less than the truth. If you find out that someone has been playing you, you move on them – whether it's ousting them right away (depending on how bad it is) or making it abundantly clear that that was their first chance. The next one will have a very different ending.

The word will get out faster than fast that you're not playing anymore – and just watch what happens throughout your enterprise. People at every level learn very quickly when their executive is as good as his word. When his actions align with his words. When the people at the top are being held just as accountable as the people at every other level.

Your executive team and employees will know you as someone they can and should trust. Someone who doesn't get the wool pulled over your eyes. Someone they can be proud of.

Then watch what happens. There is no more motivating moment in an organization than when someone gets what they deserve. The positive ripple effects are a veritable tsunami of excitement and possibilities – all of which translate into increased morale, productivity, innovation, solutions, revenues, profits, markets and more.

So as you move forward, say no to the yes-men. Take your company back from the flim-flam artists that have been playing you and find out the truth.

Then you won't have to offer me a job.

About the Author

Leslie L. Kossoff, internationally renowned executive advisor specializing in strategy and corporate turnaround, was cited by *About.com* as **“one of the most intelligent and perceptive voices on executive and managerial leadership today.”** For over 20 years, she has assisted clients in the public and private sectors in the U.S., U.K., Europe and Japan. Her clients, ranging from start-ups to multi-nationals, include Sony, Kraft Foods, the UK National Health Service, Fidelity Investments, Seiko/Epson, 3M and others.

A former C-level executive in the aerospace/defense, pharmaceutical and entertainment industries, Leslie enjoys an outstanding reputation as an invited speaker at conferences around the world. She is the author of two books, including the award-winning *Executive Thinking*, is the editor of the blog EU Economic Engine and writes regularly for *Horticulture Week/The Grower* focusing on business and management issues in the agricultural industry. Having written over one hundred articles in journals including the *Financial Times* and *CEO Magazine*, she is frequently quoted in *Entrepreneur*, *Investor’s Business Daily* and is a regular guest on the syndicated “Small Business Advocate” radio program. Jim Blasingame, its host, cites Leslie as **“one of the top organizational thinkers for executives and business owners.”**

During her association with Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the quality management expert credited with turning around Japanese and Western industry during the latter half of the last century, he declared Leslie **“Quite simply one of the best at implementation.”**

Leslie is a founding Board member of the Global Women’s Leadership Center at Santa Clara University Leavey School of Business, serves on the Advisory Board of the Russia Research Network, is the former director of the Institute for Quality and Productivity Improvement at California State University, Long Beach, has been a member of the Judges Panel for the Sterling Award for Quality in California and is included in the *Who’s Who Registry of Global Leaders* among others.

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