

# Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?

It was two o'clock in the morning. My heart jumped and my eyes popped wide open when the sound of a crying child finally penetrated my resistant eardrums. I looked across the room and saw my son, petrified with fear, standing at the bedroom door. The moonlight was bending through the bathroom skylight creating an eerie glow around him which contributed to the sensation of terror. My son was so frightened that between his uncontrollable sobs he could hardly tell me what was wrong. He wasn't sure what it was that frightened him, but he was convinced that something was going to get him.

I have now progressed in age past the period of such sleep interruptions, thank goodness. I also recognize that simply because we grow up the fear we felt as children doesn't totally leave us. We may not wake up terrified of some unseen monster, but in almost every business in America employees report that they are afraid of someone or something at work.

Sometimes we're afraid of what might happen, what someone will think, or how a person might respond to us. How many times have you been afraid to tell someone they're doing something that's making your work difficult? Have you ever said to a co-worker, "I'm not going to tell *that* to the boss," or "*You* can bring that up at the meeting, but *I'm* going to keep my mouth shut?"

A friend of mine has noticed that these offline conversations frequently take place in restrooms. He has concluded that there's a strong correlation between porcelain and speaking one's mind. I think he calls this The Porcelain Effect. When people go to the restroom during a meeting break, where they're surrounded by porcelain, they lose their fear to say things they wouldn't dare bring up in a meeting. When everyone returns to the meeting it's as if the restroom conversations never took place - everyone sits stone-faced around the table and dutifully nods approval for fear of something or someone.

What's worse, like the unseen creatures in my son's bedroom, some employees and managers don't even know what they're afraid of. And many aren't interested in stepping into the unknown to find out.

A recent survey shows that only 31% of employees feel they can express themselves honestly and candidly at work. That means that 69% feel they *can't*. Apparently the big, bad wolf lingers.

Pep talks and programs that encourage employees to speak up and take initiative to do things better are as prolific as rabbits. In reality, very little changes in many of these businesses because employees are afraid that their ideas won't be seen as helpful or appreciated. In some cases, employees have told me they are seen as troublemakers if they question existing procedures or practices.

I know of one company where a manager encouraged employees to share ideas for improving productivity. Once a few started making suggestions, they were quickly labeled complainers and found themselves seeking employment shortly thereafter.

In contrast, I recently read a couple of interviews with Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines and employees of Charles Schwab. Both Kelleher and Schwab rely on the ideas and ingenuity of employees to make their businesses successful. Schwab, in particular, is said to be as natural and down-to-earth as they come. Employees speaking to Kelleher and Schwab aren't afraid to say what's on their minds. Not surprisingly, both businesses are among the best in their industries.

I wonder how Kelleher and Schwab would quantify the price of employee fear in *their* companies.

When W. Edwards Deming was alive, he preached that we needed to drive fear out of the workplace. When he made that declaration, no doubt he understood the value of creating *fearless* organizations. Based on today's fearful 69%, I wonder if he had any idea just how far we have to go.

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**Trying it on for fit:** If you're a manager, think of two or three occasions when you withheld information from employees, kept silent when you knew a bad decision had been made, or did something that may have

contributed to employee fear.

Explore the reasons for your decision in each situation. What fears caused you to act as you did?

Determine what you could change in your beliefs, assumptions, and practices to alleviate your fears and drive fear out of your workplace. Solicit suggestions from your friends, peers, and direct reports.

If you're a non-management employee, think of two or three occasions when you failed inform your boss of a problem, suggest a solution, or express your concerns in the interest of the business.

Ask yourself what fears prevented you from doing what you felt you should. Were they real or imagined?

Challenge your own beliefs, assumptions, and practices that support or result from your fears. Look for ways to remove the conditions that perpetuate your fears and prevent you from contributing more fully.

Send me an e-mail and let me know what you learn from your experiences. I would love to hear from you.

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