

Navigating the Uncharted

Webinar Series



Transparent Leadership: Additional Thoughts From Marc D. Braun, CEO and Co-founder of Encouraging Leaders

Thank you for joining the National Conflict Resolution Center on January 24 for a conversation between Marc D. Braun, CEO of Encouraging Leaders, and Ashley Virtue, NCRC Director of External Relations. The topic – transparent leadership – inspired a number of questions that we couldn't get to during the webinar, so we passed them along to Marc for his insights:

Q: You mentioned the importance of safety in manufacturing and the need to bring “near misses” to the surface. What have leaders at Boeing done right, since the Alaska Airlines 737 Max 9 blowout? What could they do better?

Marc: This is a difficult one. I have not followed the Boeing incident closely enough to comment on what they could have done better. I can state that the pressure these leaders are under is tremendous. This kind of public scrutiny – of an event that could have cost many lives – creates an extremely challenging situation. Recognizing that first allows us to reflect on their behaviors with compassion and empathy. Whenever I hear their CEO speak or read some of their communications, it seems they are trying to be open and transparent about the mistakes made – and not just owning those mistakes, but being clear about the steps they are going to take to remedy them.

The reality is, even minor safety concerns can present communication challenges for workplace leaders. The CEO of Boeing – conceptually – is doing the right thing now, trying his best to be transparent with all stakeholders. I would want to bring those stakeholders as close as possible to all of the safety-related processes, making sure they see and understand them. I would ask for their ideas for improvement, so incidents like the Max 9 blowout don't occur again. Overall, the airline industry has done a good job examining issues and addressing them. It's why passenger planes are one of the safest modes of transportation, when measured by distance traveled.

Q: How do you get team members to participate in a transparent workplace culture? It seems the more transparent our organization tries to be, the more conflict and division it creates.

Marc: I practice what's called a personal professional check-in. It's most effective when I'm interacting with an individual, one-on-one, but can also do it in a small group or even in a larger town hall environment. If I want participation by team members, I have to demonstrate transparency myself. I do that by sharing my own life: what comes easy and what's hard; how I make decisions; the struggles I've faced, and the wins; the things that bring me joy. Whenever I openly reveal who I am, it invites others to share their own story.

Conflict, as it turns out, can be caused by a fear of making mistakes. If there's a safety incident, I want people to speak up. I have to model the behavior by first sharing my own experiences, with the idea that mistakes create an opportunity to learn. One of my favorite business leaders, Garry Ridge, calls mistakes "learning moments" that need to be imparted organization-wide, whether the result is positive or negative. To Garry, it's critical for organizational growth. I agree.

Q: I interact with youth in my job. I find myself feeling anxious when I speak with them, making it difficult to be transparent. How can I overcome this?

Marc: First of all, it's just a really cool and courageous statement anytime that you can admit your own anxiety or discomfort. It's really the first step in asking for help. The reality is, we're uncomfortable with things that we don't do often or haven't done successfully often enough, so we need to find safe environments in which we can practice and play. If you are open about your feelings of anxiety when speaking with youth, I think people will respond by offering their help and ideas for making the experience more joyful. In our coaching process, we emphasize practice, which is key to confidence building. Start by asking advice from someone you trust. Take notes, thank them for their insights, and try what they suggest. It's natural to get nervous about doing something we don't do well – so practice, practice, practice, until you get better. Thanks for a really cool question!

Q: I heard you say that fear – or being afraid – is not an attractive quality in a leader. While I understand, I would think this is somewhat contrary to being authentic because leaders are people, too, and sometimes fearful. Thoughts?

Marc: Being afraid is actually a normal human emotion. But for leaders, it can come with some less than desirable consequences. When a leader acts out of fear and gets angry – or pretends to know everything and is overly confident – they can make bad decisions. So, in the presence of fear, it's important to sit with people who offer safety and encouragement – the intimate circle that can help that leader process their fear, to the point of knowing which actions to take and bring forward to their organization.

It's okay to feel uncomfortable, but it's not the best posture to lead from. Fear-based leadership will create a climate of distrust and ultimately, affect employee morale, innovation, and productivity. Instead, I think about leading out of love, the opposite of fear. When leading out of love, you can still be uncomfortable – but you're willing to “go there” because of a greater purpose. Your care for people guides your actions.

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