

American College of Physician Executives

Telling the Truth 24/7

KATE LUDEMAN, PhD & EDDIE ERLANDSON, MD

Many years ago, when I (Kate) was vice president for Human Resources at KLA-Tencor, Bob Riopel, our CFO, who had no experience in HR, became my new manager. I felt so upset, I seriously considered leaving the company. Yet, I liked the company and loved my work. I dragged around for about a week, trying to figure out what to do.

Finally, I told him, as clearly and as kindly as I knew how, that, in my opinion, he didn't know anything about HR. I explained that I was only willing to work for him if he stayed completely out of my area. If he did, then he could count on me 100 percent. If he had concerns about anything, I would listen to them, but if I didn't agree, I wasn't going to act on them. In other words, I was going to treat him like a peer, not a manager.

To my amazement, he said he was eager to learn from me.

Telling the whole truth like that wasn't easy, but it cleared the air. That difficult discussion was the beginning of a close, successful, productive relationship. In fact, Bob encouraged me to write my first business book, which helped launch my consulting career, and I put him high on the acknowledgements page of the book.

Until I had this crucial conversation with Bob, I felt stuck. If you want your organization and your career to move at warp speed, convince everyone you work with to tell the full, unvarnished truth. Some people withhold the full truth to manipulate outcomes—to avoid penalties or receive kudos. But most people withhold the truth because they don't trust people to respond positively to feedback. This is particularly true when working with managers several organizational levels higher.

Impeccable honesty at home and at work doesn't come easily. We hint and hope and slide in from the side, broaching uncomfortable topics indirectly, if at all. I (Kate) feel endlessly fascinated by the spectrum of human behavior that causes us to look the other way. I was once paid \$30,000 to essentially tell someone he shouldn't talk with his mouth full. Another time, I received \$20,000 to help an

executive eliminate the four letter words in an opening speech she was giving to over 1,000 members of a very conservative industry association. Yet another memorable assignment involved coaching a COO who was perceived by many of her peers to have "big problems" within the company. After many hours of interviewing ten of these peers, one brave soul told the truth: The "big" problem was that the COO picked her nose in public! Why don't people, who genuinely care about their colleagues, tell them the truth? It's the old "spinach in the teeth" challenge. They dismiss someone's ideas about a project to their face, but evaporate at the prospect of giving personal feedback.

What's the source of the fear? Modern versions of executing the messenger, expressed in the form of blame (You should have come out with this months ago!), downgrading (Maybe you can't handle the responsibility you've been given here.), or even the big bust (You're fired!).

We waste enormous time and energy trying to control the uncontrollable. Susan Campbell, author of *Getting Real*, conducted a three-year study of 500 people focusing on the new human capacities we need in our tumultuous world of change and information overload. She found that 80 percent of people spend a significant amount of their workday focused on the uncontrollable. Imagine the energy and the opportunity we'd release if we focused on what we can control.

One common truth challenge people grapple with is getting buy-in from their families for a new assignment. Managers often feel thrilled at the opportunity to head up a hot new project, but their families may not appreciate the long hours this will require. As a result, they may sometimes try to control their family's response.

A typical approach may sound like, "I'm sorry guys, but my boss needs me on a major project. If I don't do it, I might get passed up for promotion, and you know, we really do need the money. I can't afford to say no." Point out that this approach spins the truth and withholds the fact that the speaker wants to take on the assignment. It spins the truth, making the company the bad guy and the executive and her

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family victims.

A more radical and impeccable version of the truth might sound like this: "Honey, I have great news! The project I wanted to manage has finally landed on my desk. Accepting it means I'll have to work this weekend, next weekend, and perhaps a few long nights. I really want to do it. Would you please support me in this? I know it will take away from our family time, and I'll miss our hiking trip. Even so, I really want this project, and I hope you'll be okay with the extra time I need to give it."

Notice how this version conveys the truth of the workload, the truth of the burden on the family and the truth of the speaker's desire for the assignment. You'll be better equipped to deliver the whole truth and create a solid agreement with your family that's based on what's real. You'll also encounter less back-end resentment and complaining, because nothing has been kept secret.

Truth is like a tonic. Feeling dragged down? Instead of munching a high carb bar or sipping a protein drink, ask yourself if some truth needs to be told. Just as food nourishes the body, truth is sustenance for our spirits. We hear lots more laughter in companies where truth is a way of life.

Can you imagine your organization reaching this level of truth? If not, begin today to change that. A culture of shaded and withheld truth requires the complicity of everyone in it. Take the first, courageous step in your next conversation, then teach your organization how. The truth—and the culture of candor that results—will indeed set you all free.

*Now, more than ever,
the truth shall set you free.*

Contact info@worthethic.com or refer to www.worthethic.com for more information.



Kate Ludeman, PhD, is CEO and founder of Worth Ethic Corporation and author of *The Corporate Mystic* and four other books. She has been a featured speaker at the Fortune Magazine Summit of the Best and Most Admired Companies and has coached more than 1,000 CEOs and senior executives on every continent.



Eddie Erlandson, MD, is a Senior Vice President at Worth Ethic Corporation and a former hospital Chief of Staff and vascular surgeon. He delivers keynote talks, coaches executives on leadership, and facilitates hospital mergers.



Worth Ethic
CORPORATION

309 W. Main, Suite 116
Round Rock, TX 78664
(512) 493-2300 • info@worthethic.com
www.worthethic.com