Seeking Help in Times of Need

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Assumptions

Organizations and their members need to seek help during trying times

In trying times, we need help from others. This includes material resources, others' skill, time and effort, as well emotional support. By actively seeking help from others when faced with a problem, organizational resources can be more efficiently allocated to the problem at hand, increasing the chances that the challenge can be surmounted (Tyre & Ellis, 1993). However, organizations are abound with stories of people who do not seek help during trying times, even when help is easily available. Ironically, it is especially during trying and challenging times—when our own abilities are taxed to the limit, when we are not sure what to do, when we feel we are not up to the job—that people are most reluctant to seek help from others.

People are often reluctant to seek help, especially during trying times

One poignant example is the Perkin-Elmer Corporation, which won the first contract to produce the mirror for the Hubble space telescope. Expert optical designers, engineers and technicians were assembled as the project team. To support the intricate production process of the mirror, Perkin-Elmer made sure the project team had adequate support from experts within the company. One of the experts asked to support the project team was Roderic Scott. A retired optical designer and former technical director of the company, he was asked to return to Perkin-Elmer as a consultant and advisor to the mirror project. Despite Scott's expertise, members of the project team rarely consulted him. Instead, they avoided him as much as they could—"Whenever Scott knocked on the door of the polishing room, the technicians...would say, 'Hey, Rod is out there. Don't let him in. Turn up the radio.'" (Capers & Lipton, 1993, p. 51).

Interestingly, the more the Hubble team realized the technical difficulties they faced, the more they resisted help from others. For example, when initial tests of the mirror showed there were flaws, the lead engineer of the Hubble team began to restrict access to the measuring and testing records on the mirror. As the tests of the mirror revealed increasingly severe technical problems, access to testing records was more strictly monitored. Only the lead engineer was allowed to show these records to individuals outside the team. As a result, although numerous experts were available during the production process to catch errors and correct them, the Hubble telescope went into space with the mirror that was seriously flawed.

Organizations exert pressure on individuals to appear superior, competent and independent; this inhibits people's willingness to seek help even when they need it.

Why do people not seek help during trying times—when they know they need help and when help is available? We know from extensive research that organizations value superiority, competence and independence (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). Organizations not only explicitly profess these values, but also reward and promote individuals who appear as such. Individuals in organizations also expend considerable time and effort to appear superior, competent and independent to craft a positive image. However, seeking help often undermines these values (Lee, 1997). First, by seeking help, one acknowledges that one is lacking in experience or knowledge, therefore appearing incompetent. Second, by seeking help from another person, be it material, financial or emotional, one acknowledges dependence on another person. Third, by seeking help from another person, one implicitly acknowledges the helper is better and more knowledgeable than she is, thereby appearing inferior.

During trying times, or when faced with a difficult challenge, organizations and their members often feel the need to appear strong; in short, to create an appearance of superiority, competence and independence. This was evident in America's response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The administration repeatedly announced their plans for revenge and justice, and demonstrated their resolve and determination to win the war on terrorism. This was also evident at Perkin-Elmer; the more the team realized they were "in over their heads," the harder they tried to maintain a public image of competence. Overall, during trying times, it is especially difficult to appear incompetent, inferior and dependent through seeking help.
What Leaders Should Be Aware of

Leaders are particularly reluctant to seek help

People's reluctance to seek help in trying times stems from pressures to appear competent, superior and independent. Such pressures are especially strong on leaders. Leaders are expected by others to be strong, and thus during trying times have a particularly difficult time seeking help from others. Research has shown that when faced with a challenge, leaders and other high-status individuals in organizations are less likely to seek help than non-leaders or lower-status individuals. Leaders are wary that, if they appear incompetent, inferior and dependent, they may lose power (Lee, 1997; Lee, 1999).

Organizational members look up to leaders as models; this is especially true during trying times

Organizational members often look to their leaders to determine the appropriate types of behaviors and values they should exhibit. Leaders should be aware that this tendency is particularly strong during trying times. Trying times—whether it is a technologically challenging project such as the Hubble telescope, or a negative event such as a layoff—entail a high level of uncertainty. Most people have not encountered similar situations before, and they look to their leaders for guidance and direction. If leaders are particularly wary of seeking help, even if it is clear to all that help is needed, it sends a signal to others in the organization that help seeking is not acceptable.

What Leaders Can Do

Leaders should provide an example-send a strong signal that seeking help is not only expected, but also will help the individual and the organization overcome its immediate challenges

During trying times, leaders are often torn between feelings of powerlessness and the pressure to remain a pillar of strength for others. However, one way leaders can facilitate help seeking is to explicitly acknowledge inferiority, dependence and incompetence. Only through active help-seeking behavior on the part of the leader will others also feel that help seeking is acceptable. Ironically, the ability of leaders to show weakness can be effective in getting others in the organization to proactively seek help and resources to support the organization during trying times.

Leaders should create an environment-in trying times and in non-trying times-where it is acceptable to make mistakes, to fail at one's tasks, to experiment unsuccessfully. Only in such an environment will people not fear the consequences of appearing incompetent, inferior and dependent.

Although "excellence" and "zero tolerance for mistakes" are worthy goals, leaders who extol them inadvertently inhibit help-seeking and other types of risk-taking behaviors. People become afraid to make mistakes, to commit the slightest error, to try something new and innovative that may or may not work (Lee, 2001). In times of need and challenge, they hide their need, much like the Hubble team members who locked Roderic Scott out of their laboratory and restricted access to their testing documents. Leaders need to create an environment where it is acceptable to fail, to make mistakes and to look inferior and incompetent.

Leaders can soften the perceived costs of seeking help through structural changes

The Perkin-Elmer story shows that simply providing sources of help is not adequate. People in need must also seek out that help. One way to facilitate this is to make it less threatening for people to appear incompetent, inferior or dependent. For example, most people usually have to ask their superiors if they need extra resources or other forms of help. However, it may be particularly threatening to appear incompetent, dependent and inferior in front of one's superiors. Leaders can facilitate help seeking by providing sources of help at all levels, so that people can receive help from their peers as well (Lee, in press).

Footnotes:


