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Critical upward communication:

'Ten Commandments' for improving strategy and decision making

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Abstract

Critical upward communication improves decision making in organisations. Without it, senior management teams become out of touch with the mood of their people, and underestimate or miss emerging problems in their marketplace. They are more likely to produce strategies that are misaligned with the perceptions of their employees. The possibility of successful strategic implementation is therefore dramatically reduced. This suggests that two way communication and critical feedback is vital to organisational success. The problem is that most of us are suspicious of any feedback to the effect that our behaviour, decisions or most cherished beliefs are in error. We react instinctively against it – what has been called the *automatic vigilance effect*. Moreover, most of us are also reluctant to transmit critical information, recognising that the hostile reaction of recipients may endanger our standing in their eyes, and possibly damage our careers. We therefore exaggerate how much we agree with the opinions of people who have a higher status than us – *the ingratiation effect*. This causes managers to form inaccurate impressions of the climate within their organisations, with dangerous strategic consequences. This article explores the problems that these dynamics create for companies. It examines the benefits that can be obtained from institutionalising more critical upward feedback into an organisation's communication systems. I propose 'ten commandments' that can help organisations to reorient themselves in this direction.

HOW SENIOR MANAGERS BECOME OUT OF TOUCH WITH THEIR PEOPLE

The effectiveness of strategy ultimately boils down to the soundness of the vision that underpins it, and the willingness of employees at the coalface to implement it. Employee resistance can undermine the soundest vision or most logical business plan. But a poor vision and staff resistance forms a lethal cocktail, and results more often than not in organisational failure. Managers attempt to safeguard against such eventualities by scanning the external environment for emerging competitive threats and fresh business opportunities. The strategies developed by the senior management team in response to such environmental stimuli will be subject to rigorous tests and debate as part of the formulation process. However, the view from those charged with implementation is often neglected¹.

But scanning the internal environment could give companies equally valuable information. Employees can provide invaluable feedback on managers' perceptions of threats and opportunities, and the soundness or otherwise of plans to respond to them. It is self evident that, to be effective, much of this feedback needs to be critical in nature. No individual or group makes the right decisions all the time. But here is the paradox. Critical feedback may be indispensable for good decisions. Despite this, most of us react instinctively against it. We reject critical feedback, and then penalise dissenters ('the awkward squad'), thus ensuring that we will hear less from them in the future. Faced with this, employees quickly realise that the best way to acquire influence and secure their position is to exaggerate how much they agree with the opinions of senior managers. Over time, more and more upward communication in companies becomes

flattering rather than critical in nature. This may be gratifying – and, indeed, most of us are more vulnerable to the seductive power of flattery than we like to think. But it poses a serious problem. What happens when strategies wrought by managers are seriously in error, as many of them inevitably are? When sufficient and timely critical feedback is curtailed or eliminated, managers deprive themselves of a crucial means of ascertaining how viable their strategies are. Flattery constitutes a perfumed trap for decision makers. It improves the odds of organisational failure. Consequently, it is vital that the role of critical upward communication becomes more recognised as an element of the strategy formulation process.

My attention became focused on this problem in the course of conducting assessments of communication practices and climate in numerous companies with a number of colleagues². Such exercises usually end in a formal presentation to senior managers, describing the good, the bad and the ugly. But I have been consistently struck by the following pattern. The managers concerned generally accepted positive findings uncritically, and indeed often claimed that they knew them already. However, they were frequently shocked by negative information. It appeared that the surveys we conducted were often their first opportunity to find out what their people really thought about the organisation's overall direction, the priorities of its senior management team, and their style of communication. On a day-by-day basis, systems were rarely in place for people to formally or informally feed this information into the decision making process. Even when such systems were in place, the resultant information was often dismissed as unimportant. Nor is this experience unique. The British TV series 'Back to the Floor' features top executives spending a week back working on the shop-floor. Without fail, in each programme, the person concerned is astonished by what they find.

Evidently, formal communication channels often filter out crucial bits of information, leaving those at the top more out of the loop than they had realised.

Some managers took data indicating problems as an alarm call, and immediately went to work on action plans designed to remedy the problems. But others bitterly contested the findings. These managers argued that no one had ever brought such issues to their attention before, and that the data must therefore be flawed. Paradoxically, I have rarely found a mood of surprise or resistance further down the organisational hierarchy. Both middle managers and non-managerial employees had a keener awareness of problems concerning such issues as morale and communication climate. In contrast, top managers were much more convinced that their people were well informed on key corporate goals than was the case. Moreover, they often seemed more certain that others could openly speak their minds to them than anybody else in their organisation. These experiences raise important issues.

My key point is that honest communication between those without managerial power and those with such power, particularly when it consists of openly critical feedback, is an important aspect of decision making – in my view, a crucial ingredient of any effective strategy formulation and implementation process. It is a barometer of organisational health. In particular, systems should be established to facilitate critical upward communication both when strategy is being formulated and when it is implemented. It is increasingly clear that strategic dialogue needs to be embedded throughout the organisation, with more employees taking responsibility for a wider range of issues. This requires a constant dialogue between managers and their people, and among varied work groups, about likely competitive threats and the most

appropriate means of dealing with them. The debate might not always be polite or pretty. But without it the odds on success are narrowed.

Yet top managers are anxious to move rapidly into implementation. They are often impatient with debate: it appears to take too much time. The danger with such impatience is that senior managers can come up with a new direction that hasn't been properly tested, refined and improved by ongoing process of challenging dialogue. It is also more likely to run up against uncomprehending resistance, further increasing the likelihood of failure. In such a context, it is scarcely surprising that so many strategic plans are never implemented! Thus, I argue that managers need to face up to the following questions:

- *How much importance do we really attach to critical feedback?* A huge body of research suggests that decision-making improves in a climate of debate, dissent and discussion³. I look at some of the benefits that arise from welcoming critical feedback rather than suppressing it, and with which I believe managers need to become more familiar.
- *What are the obstacles that prevent critical feedback being articulated more frequently?* However justified critical feedback is, most of us react instinctively against it. On the other hand, we also like and encourage positive feedback. Thus, managers often respond to critical feedback in ways that reduce and then eliminate it altogether, fatally distorting the communication climate within their organisations. In essence, they tend to have their own magic mirror, which reassures them that they are indeed the fairest and most effective communicators in the land. Drawing on the research conducted with a number of colleagues, I look at the communication dynamics involved in this process,

and which managers need to consider when addressing these problems in their own company.

- *What can be done to institutionalise more critical feedback into management communication systems?* Action to address this problem can take place at group and individual levels. I propose ‘Ten Commandments’ that equip managers with a greater range of options for dealing with this problem.

THE BENEFITS OF DISSENT AND UPWARD FEEDBACK

Over the past five decades, there has been a growing trend towards more participative working relationships and practices. Communication is consistently recognised as an integral part of participative processes, and its role in these has been widely studied⁴. But most corporate organizations have remained largely autocratic in form. In particular, the need for upward communication that is critical of organisational goals and management performance has been little recognised by management practitioners. Paradoxically, it has long been known that feedback is essential to effective human performance in any task. The more channels of accurate and helpful feedback we have access to, the better we are likely to perform. Most companies recognise the importance of obtaining feedback from key markets to assess how their products are being received. They pay particular attention to data indicating problems with product quality or an ebbing of customer confidence. But, in relation to staff communications, many appear to take the view that feedback is only required from the top down. Such a perspective is consistent with the bias in the literature on both strategic management and transformational leadership which emphasises change as a top down process. Influence is generally conceived as something that flows from those with power to

those without, rather than the other way round. A double standard is evident. Senior managers set a strategic direction, but do so after a robust process of discussion and debate. Typically, employees are usually denied similar opportunities – their role is to act as the enthusiastic cheer leaders for decisions already made. They are nevertheless expected to display an understanding, commitment and engagement to strategies similar to that of managers – but without the benefit of a comparable process of debate, dissent and dialogue. This puts them in a position where they lack not only ownership of the organisation’s strategic direction, but also the information required to align their behaviours with it. In turn, the ‘lack of honest upward communication from lower levels (makes) it impossible for the senior team to learn about the limitations of their mental models and the capabilities needed to accomplish strategic objectives⁵.’ No wonder that these latter authors have identified the lack of adequate upward communication as one of the ‘silent killers’ of organisational strategy, contributing as it does to an inadequate alignment in goals and purpose between many of the key people who are essential for competitive success. Contrary to such a situation, the weight of the research evidence suggests that, where they exist, upward feedback, upward communication and open door policies deliver significant organisational benefits. This evidence is summarised in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

Such findings are consistent with the view that organisations are best viewed as information processing entities⁶. From this standpoint, research has long suggested that people are more likely to be committed to a course of action if they are involved in the decision making process that gives rise to it. The articulation of employee voice is therefore a vital, if often under realised, ingredient of efforts at empowerment and

involvement⁷. In this context, communication can be viewed as a step on the escalator of participation. People cannot be viewed merely conduits for information. They are active, and questioning, agents in the process of decision making. What can be termed ‘the dialogic organisation’ seeks to institutionalise many forms of employee voice, including dissent, into the strategy making process, and embeds strategic dialogue throughout the organisation.

As uncertainty and complexity increase it is likely that the need for information processing will grow. An upward flow of information is therefore likely to become an increasingly important issue. Yet it is also clear that a smooth flow of critical upward communication does not always occur. As two leading researchers have cogently argued⁸:

‘Not only do managers often prefer to hear good news but, in fact, subordinates often get promoted up the career ladder because they tell only good news. Thus, as managers move up in the organisation, it becomes more difficult for them to get honest feedback on their efforts as their subordinates are busily portraying every effort as a success.’

Paradoxically, this is more likely to undermine the status of senior managers than it is to strengthen their position. Research has shown that when managers openly solicit and accept negative feedback they gain a more accurate picture of their actual performance and are rated more favourably by employees. But when they look for positive feedback they acquire no extra insight into their true performance and are viewed less favourably by others⁹.

Despite this, many managers deny the existence of problems and discourage critical feedback. Research has suggested that, to deny fault and avert the possibility of blame, senior managers sometimes conceal negative organisational outcomes, suppress information, cover up negative financial data, deny failure, and sometimes ‘launch propaganda campaigns that deny the existence of crises’¹⁰. Given that they also appear to receive little in the way of critical upward feedback from rank and file employees, it is pertinent to identify the obstacles that get in the way.

BARRIERS TO UPWARD FEEDBACK

1. Fear of Feedback

A range of considerations influence the extent to which we actively look for feedback. Most of us have a tendency to prefer feedback that is supportive of our behaviour, in both our personal and professional lives. Negative feedback can be personally upsetting and may also impact adversely upon one’s public image. Feedback to the effect that a cherished course of action is failing or lacks support is bound to be unwelcome. Seeking critical feedback may even be seen as denoting weakness. It isn’t surprising therefore that people at all organisational levels are often fearful about seeking feedback on their performance or on the quality of their decisions; managers are no different. A range of considerations influence the extent to which we actively look for feedback¹¹. Some of these are listed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

Followers who are less compliant will be more likely to deliver upward and critical feedback. But many managers value compliance more than dissent, and will be more likely to fire dissidents than to applaud them. As is often the case, Enron provides a good case example. Sherron Watkins was a senior employee who worked with the company's Chief Financial Officer, Andy Fastow. When she realised that the company's losses would become apparent sometime in 2003 or 2004, she drew her concerns to the attention of the then CEO, Ken Lay. Support was not forthcoming from other senior executives, who evidently feared that to acknowledge the problems would damage their careers. Lay's own response suggests these fears were well founded. Within days of meeting with Watkins, he contacted the organization's lawyers to inquire if grounds could be found for firing her.

2. Problems of Ingratiation

One of the most potent explanations for difficulties with upward feedback can be found in ingratiation theory. This proposes that those with a lower level of status habitually exaggerate the extent to which they agree with the opinions and actions of higher status people, as a means of acquiring influence with them¹². Studies indicate that decreased power among subordinates is accompanied by an increased tendency on their part to employ some form of ingratiation and an increased use of 'politeness' strategies¹³. The business consequences can be severe. For example, a culture of sycophancy has been identified as a key factor in the profits collapse that afflicted one of the UK's best-known retailers, Marks & Spencer, in the late 1990s¹⁴. The company chairman's direct reports have confessed that they actively avoided bringing bad news to his attention, fearing his wrath. This meant that he lacked a full appreciation of his organisation's

problems. Similarly, British Prime Minister Tony Blair became convinced that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, and took the country to war on the premise that they could be deployed against the UK within forty five minutes. Exhaustive searches of the country after the invasion showed that it had none. It appears that any evidence inconsistent with his instincts was critiqued or ignored. However, a flawed dossier culled from an old PhD thesis was instantly accepted, since the evidence it offered was consistent with the Prime Minister's instincts. In effect, different standards of proof were demanded for positions, depending on how supportive or critical they were of the decisions preferred by those at the top. Officials involved in policy and strategy development learned to muffle their views. However, as De Vries¹⁵ has noted in a different situation: 'Effective organisational functioning demands that people have a healthy disrespect for their boss, feel free to express emotions and opinions openly, and are comfortable engaging in banter and give and take.'

In addition, self-efficacy biases suggest that most of us imagine we are better on various crucial dimensions of behaviour than we actually are. Accordingly, researchers have generally found that managers view the defective and uncritical feedback they receive from subordinates as accurate, sincere, and well meant – it is in line with their self-efficacy biases. Since they are therefore inclined to think that the inaccurate and ingratiating feedback they receive daily is accurate, they grow even less inclined to seek mechanisms that institutionalise critical upward feedback into the decision-making process. Both peripheral and close range vision become tainted, and lead to poor decisions.

3. Power differentials

Power and status differentials fuel ingratiation practices. But they also cause people to censor the expression of their views more generally. Enron again serves as a good illustration. The company operated a system known as 'rank and yank', in which those classified as poor performers stood ultimately to lose their jobs. Given its aggressive recruitment practices, and the pressures of being a new employee, it appears that up to half the organisation's employees were in peril of redundancy at any one time¹⁶. It is very unlikely that people in such a fearful state would communicate critical feedback to those managers with the power to 'yank' anyone perceived as being off-message. Clearly, some imbalances of power are unavoidable. But counter-balancing mechanisms are essential. Otherwise, the communication climate will deteriorate, and those at the receiving end of whatever information is transmitted will find it harder, through the fog, to retain a clear perception of reality.

4. Groupthink

Problems with upward feedback have consistently been shown to be a key part of what is known as 'groupthink'. This proposes that groups insulated from critical outside feedback develop illusions in their own invulnerability, excessive self-confidence in the quality of their decision-making and an exaggerated sense of their distinctiveness from other groups. Furthermore, they deny or distort facts, offer rationalisations for their activities, use myth and humour to exaggerate their sense of worth, and attribute the failure of their decisions to external factors, rather than the quality of their own decision making. It follows that such groups will also disparage criticism from outside their own ranks, since it is more likely to conflict with the group's ideal self-image,

depart from its well-entrenched norms, and come from sources outside the high status few that belong to the inner circle of key players¹⁷. Ironically, ‘companies of all sizes increasingly recognise that ideas are their most precious commodity and employees who produce them are sought after resources.’¹⁸ But the evidence suggests that the welcoming embrace accorded new ideas stops short of those that are critical of organisational orthodoxy – an orthodoxy which may, of course, blind those concerned to the changes they must make to enhance their strategic position. Moreover, those attempting to offer feedback are more likely to respond to such a reaction by minimising much needed future critical feedback. In turn, this is likely to reinforce the conviction of those at the top that, rogue indicators aside, things are much better than they are, and that the group does not require additional outside input.

5. Narcissism and Group Identity

Critical upward feedback is often systematically distorted, constrained and eliminated. When this occurs, and consistent with the data on groupthink, a narcissistic group identity may result, characterised by such ego-defence mechanisms as ‘denial, rationalisation, attributional egotism, sense of entitlement, and ego aggrandizement’¹⁹. People have a need to nurture a positive sense of self, and they embrace ego-defensive behaviour in order to maintain self-esteem. Eliminating or disparaging critical feedback is one obvious means of accomplishing this.

I worked recently with one Senior Management Team (SMT) in the health sector who insisted that they wanted to empower their staff to take decisions, and free them to transmit upward feedback. They complained, however, that people resisted their

efforts to accomplish these goals, and that rather than take decision-making power into their hands they continued to ‘delegate it upwards.’ Moreover, narcissism implies a tendency to blame others for whatever problems are admitted, rather than owning one’s own contribution to their creation – what I would describe as a process of ‘blame realignment’. In line with this, the SMT explained all communication problems as the responsibility of the next tier of general managers immediately below themselves. They were held to be uniformly incompetent, and failing in all aspects of their job. Unfortunately, close scrutiny of the SMT’s behaviour as opposed to its avowed intentions found that these same managers had themselves appointed this management layer in the previous eighteen months; that they had then eliminated two dissenters from the ranks of the SMT, and hence acquired a reputation for penalising dissent; that even their direct reports were afraid to openly express critical views; and that transparent mechanisms to facilitate upward communication were absent.

In general, the danger is that managers deprived of sufficient critical feedback can develop the mindset found among those rock stars who surround themselves with a sycophantic entourage. A narcissistic self-image then results, in which all successes is credited to the wisdom of a select few and all problems are blamed on the frailties of others. Such managers eventually find themselves deceived by their own publicity. The solution requires experimentation with power sharing, and a downsizing of entourages. I use the word ‘experimentation’ deliberately, since it is clear that letting go means someone else taking many decisions which managers may still be held responsible for. Since all humans are fallible, the results may be occasionally unedifying. But most organisations have erred in precisely the opposite direction.

They have a long way to go before there is a realistic possibility of over-empowered employees running amok in the boardroom.

One study of the issue which illustrates the problem particularly well involved two twelve-country studies on industrial democracy and a five year longitudinal programme across seven companies. It concludes that 'organizational influence sharing appears to have made only limited progress during the past 50 years.'²⁰ Most employees have no real opportunity to contribute to the operation of their workplace in any context broader than the execution of their own job. To avoid sharing power with subordinates (who they may well narcissistically regard as inadequate), managers tend to overstate the downsides of power-sharing. They fortify themselves with reservations against what are in fact advantageous courses of action. Like dieting and exercise, it is easier to talk about relinquishing power and control than it is to actually do it. Reasons to postpone action can always be manufactured. On closer inspection, most of them turn out to be excuses. In reality, context is everything. Opportunities to share power exist, and should be more thoroughly exploited by managers seeking to make a genuine difference.

6. How managers exaggerate the frequency of critical feedback

Managers have a fundamental need to make sense of the business world around them, and indeed spend a great deal of time constructing plausible sounding narratives to achieve this end. However, the process is fraught with error. In particular, sense making is often driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Here, I would suggest that irrational belief systems and naïve story construction ensures that managers often

have an imbalanced view of the communication climate in their companies, an exaggerated impression of how much upward feedback they receive and an insufficient awareness of the need for more robust systems to facilitate employee communications.

Irrational beliefs are unfounded assumptions about the nature of the physical and social world. In particular, it appears that unusual events stand out in our minds, and in the process of retelling, acquire an added vividness. Even though the event was actually atypical, perversely, those involved in the discourse gradually become convinced that what they are describing is more typical of the category than is actually the case. This is a good illustration of what has been termed the availability error – information that is more readily available to us (such as an unusual event) influences our perceptions much more than information that is harder to access. The effect, however, is that implausible stories become widely circulated, correspondingly more available to our minds and hence deeply believed²¹.

Thus, on the relatively rare occasions when managers do receive critical upward feedback they experience it as a striking and hence memorable event. They are likely to pay it special attention. This ensures that it remains vividly in their memory, and hence convinces them that it is more typical an event than is actually the case. Thus, one research project found that positive upward feedback is a more common occurrence than negative upward feedback²². However, this study also showed that the managers concerned perceived many more instances of negative feedback than their subordinates. But both managers and subordinates perceived the same frequency of positive feedback. In essence, each instance of negative feedback acquired a

heightened sense of vividness for its recipient. Managers then assumed that their heightened awareness of the event rendered it more typical of the feedback category than was the case. Hence, they are less likely to appreciate the need for more of it.

7. Over-critique of Negative Feedback

How top managers respond to critical feedback largely determines how much of it they will receive in the future. For most of us, critical feedback is less accepted and is perceived as less accurate than positive feedback. People are especially sensitive to negative input – what has been termed the *automatic vigilance effect*²³. In general, it generates an angry response. This can be easily tested. Try telling friends that their new dress, suit or hairstyle is a disastrous mistake, and then calculate the ratio of welcoming and outraged responses that you receive. In the work context, intentionally or otherwise, it is clear that the generally less than enthusiastic response of managers to critical feedback discourages it. When this happens, the opportunity to grapple with problems recedes ever further into the mist.

I offer an example here from the health sector SMT discussed earlier. During feedback to the team, some mildly critical data was reported which indicated lower-than-ideal levels of staff trust in information received from senior managers. A number of positive issues were also highlighted, including trusting relationships between lower level managers and their direct immediate subordinates.

The SMT responded in two markedly different ways. Firstly, they enthusiastically accepted the data indicating strengths in the communication climate. But they rejected outright any feedback that implied weaknesses in their performance, although it was

derived from the same methods. Moreover, they invited a trained statistician to interrogate the data, with a view to exposing its shortcomings. In meetings on the issue, their efforts were completely devoted to rejecting critical data, rather than developing an action plan to address the problems it illuminated. In short, the data were simultaneously regarded as prescient – but fatally flawed. The process suggests that top managers have a tendency to over-critique negative feedback, while instantly agreeing with positive feedback.

Two results are likely to flow from this. Firstly, most people at the receiving end of such a response will minimise further efforts at conveying what they really feel. The organisational climate is perceived as punitive. Employees crouch in their trenches, rather than engage with each other or managers. In essence, this suggests that senior managers engage too readily in a process of unconscious feedback distortion. For example, it has been found that some subordinates who had experienced extremely negative emotional encounters with their supervisors edited their communication to make it more formal, superficial, task-oriented and devoid of personal messages (e.g. self disclosures)²⁴. Thus, motivating truthful upward communication is widely recognised as a serious problem.

Secondly, when senior managers put themselves in the position of encouraging only the feedback that they like and penalising that which they dislike, they acquire an imbalanced view of the climate in their own companies. I suspect that this dynamic underlies a problem I have often encountered – the tendency for senior managers to be the only ones surprised by data offering a critical diagnosis of the communication

climate in their companies. The challenge, clearly, is to adopt an equally rigorous approach to both positive and negative feedback.

8. Characteristics of Top Teams and Communication Networks

Top teams are responsible for setting strategic direction, and communicating it widely among teams, team members and other emergent communication networks. But as organisations grow larger, so do distances between team members, between teams, and between teams and senior managers. Meanwhile, the importance of strategic alliances and inter-organisational collaborations has grown in recent decades, rendering communication networks more important than ever.

However, there is an obvious problem with the emergence of rich communication networks. The ‘law of N-squared’ proposes that with more and more people in a given organisation the number of potential links in a network organisation increases geometrically, and soon exceeds everyone’s capacity for communicative action²⁵. The law of propinquity also recognises that the probability of two people communicating is inversely proportional to the distance between them. The number of communication options, as well as obligations, combined with such prosaic matters as physical distance renders contact between senior managers and those further down the hierarchy increasingly elusive. Although initiatives can be taken to compensate for these difficulties (including the use of e-communications), it is unlikely that much will happen if senior managers themselves do not recognise the absence of upward communication as a problem.

9. Autocratic Models of Leadership

Research has long shown that new group members, or those with low status, initially acquire influence within a group by over-conforming to its emergent norms²⁶ - i.e. in order not to offend key players, they minimise the amount of critical feedback that they are prepared to offer. If they are perceived not to be 'fitting in', they are penalised, usually through the withdrawal of valued social rewards. I recently worked in one company that exemplified the resultant mindset. Employees reported the existence of an unofficial culture which revolved around the notion that people were expected to 'fit in, or f*** off.'

Such over-conformity means that followers comply with destructive forms of action, in order to ingratiate themselves with their leaders. In fact, it puts leaders at risk. The leader takes the absence of overt dissent as assent, and moreover views it as supplementary evidence that the given course of action is correct – what has been termed consensual validation. The leader marches into battle, armoured by his or her greater status, authority and power. They fail to realise that the structure which gives them these advantages also deprives them of critical reaction from followers, thus leaving the leader fatally out of touch with reality and bereft of sufficient followers on the battle field. Thus, the most successful leaders are liable to be those with the least compliant followers, 'for when leaders err – and they always do – the leader with compliant followers will fail²⁷..'

Yet many managers view resistance as something to be overcome, rather than as useful feedback. This problem is inherent to myths of heroic leadership. Managers influenced

by such myths often think of influence in unidirectional terms – as something that flows from leaders to subordinates, rather than vice-versa. And, in fact, research does suggest that most feedback comes from persons in authority to their subordinates. In this environment, it is easy for managers to conclude that the ideal state for their organisation is one of monoculturism²⁸. Difference, dissent, debate and critical feedback are then banished to the margins of the group's tightly policed norms. This is accomplished through the imposition of both formal and informal sanctions. Thus, it has long been known that in a coercive environment, instead of facilitating dissent, 'tremendous overt and covert pressure is brought to bear on everyone to conform publicly, to participate actively, and to work hard, while a façade is maintained that such conformity and dedication is entirely voluntary or the product of successful ideological persuasion' ²⁹.

The consequences of such defects are clear. They include the elimination of dissent, an insufficient flow of critical upward communication, the accumulation of power at the centre, a failure to sufficiently consider alternative sources of action, and a growing belief on the leader's part that s/he is indispensable for the organisation's success.

TEN COMMANDEMENTS FOR IMPROVING CRITICAL UPWARD COMMUNICATION

I have argued here that critical upward feedback improves the quality of an organisation's decisions, and is therefore a vital aspect of improved strategic planning and implementation. But I have also pointed to some of the ways in such feedback is eliminated or distorted. Companies affected will be less likely to reach good decisions

in the first place, or address emerging problems before they become Enron level catastrophes.

The question is: what can be done to stimulate more critical upward communication and reduce ingratiation, groupthink and the other problems that get in the way? There is no 'magic bullet' on this issue, and no substitute for a patient and persistent approach. Moreover, whatever we do, some status and power differentials are bound to remain. However, their negative impact can at least be minimised. With those caveats, the following 'ten commandments' may form a modest starting point. While not written in stone, and inevitably having less authority than a Biblical edict, they are summarised in Table 4, and discussed in detail below:

Insert Table 4 here

1. Experiment with both upward and 360-degree appraisal. Such practices are no longer regarded as revolutionary, and are commonly employed in many leading corporations, including AT&T, the Bank of America, Caterpillar, GTE and General Electric. They are a powerful means of institutionalising feedback. Moreover, there is growing evidence to suggest that they genuinely stimulate more focused self-development activities³⁰. It is of course vital that the underlying organisational culture is genuinely supportive, and that the feedback obtained is utilised to shape changes in behaviour. Otherwise, both sides grow discouraged and give up on their relationship. Disappointment is more likely to occur when such efforts are freighted with over-optimistic expectations, and the need to transform the wider organisational culture is not recognised. But, implemented with a realistic grasp of what can be achieved and a determination to tackle whatever obstacles arise, both upward and 360-degree appraisal

can make a major contribution to the creation of a more open and honest communication climate.

2. *Managers should familiarise themselves with the basics of ingratiation theory.* I have found that most top teams readily accept the notion of ingratiation. During workshops, many have swapped amusing anecdotes that vividly describe the process in action. But, in line with the great deal that is now known of self-efficacy biases, they then mostly go on to assume that they themselves are immune to its effects. In reality, they almost never are. Senior managers, in particular, should recognise that they will be on the receiving end of too much feedback that is positive and too little that is critical, whatever their intentions. Moreover, they are just as susceptible to the effects of ingratiating behaviours as anyone else. While increased awareness never solves a problem by itself, it is an essential first step. Managers at all levels need to become more aware of ingratiation dynamics, of their own susceptibility to its effects and of the most effective responses to adopt in dealing with it. Such awareness forms part of the ABC of emotional literacy. Managers without it risk building catastrophically imbalanced relationships with their people.

3. *Positive feedback should be subject to the same, or greater scrutiny, than negative feedback.* Otherwise, positive feedback will come to predominate, managers will give it undue attention, and they will then go on to develop a dangerously rose-tinted view of the climate within their own organisations. In turn, this means that key problems remain off the agenda, and will therefore grow worse. Managers should adopt a thoroughly questioning attitude to all feedback from those with a lower status, and treat feedback that is unremittingly positive in tone with considerable scepticism. Perhaps Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, offered the most instructive advice on how to react: *'The only benefit of flattery is that by hearing what we are not, we may be*

instructed what we ought to be. Management meetings should combat the tendency to bask in positive feedback, and instead focus on a regular agenda of questions such as the following:

- What problems have come to our attention recently?
- What criticisms have we received about the decisions we are taking?
- Are the criticisms valid, partially or completely? What should we change in response to them?
- How can we get more critical feedback into our decision-making processes?

As in all things, balance is critical. A focus *only* on critical feedback would be as detrimental as its opposite, even though, in the present climate, there is little danger of this occurring. That is not the intention here. Rather, the suggestion is that both positive and critical feedback should be probed to ascertain how accurate it is. In particular, the motivation of the person or persons engaged in flattery should be considered. Flattery is best thought of as a non-monetary bribe. It preys on similar weaknesses. Managers should therefore ask themselves: what does this person have to gain by flattering me? And what they have to lose by disagreeing with me?

4. *Managers should seek out opportunities for regular formal and informal contact with staff at all levels.* This should replace reliance on official reports, written communiqués or communication mediated through various management layers. Informal interaction is more likely to facilitate honest, two-way communication, provide managers with a more accurate impression of life and opinions at all levels of their organisation, and open up new opportunities for both managers and staff to influence each other. ‘Back to the Floor’ initiatives are increasingly recognised as a useful means of achieving this. A key focus during such contact should be the search for critical feedback. By contrast, Royal tours and flying visits yield nothing in the way

of useful feedback. There are many other means by which managers can put more distance between themselves and head office, and less distance between themselves and non-managerial employees. As a rule of thumb, the more reliant a manager is on official channels of communication the more likely it is that s/he will be out of touch with the mood of his or her people.

5. *Promote systems for greater participation in decision-making.* Participation involves the creation of structures that empower people, and which enables them to collaborate in activities that go beyond the minimum co-ordination efforts characteristic of much work practice³¹. In general, people should be encouraged to take more decisions on their own. Open, information-based tactics are critical for success. Nevertheless, on this crucial issue, many communication efforts remain rudimentary. In working with senior managers, I have frequently been astonished by how many admit that their organisations do not have even a formal suggestion scheme in place. Its benefits have been documented over several decades. Yet a recent survey of members of the Institute of Management in the UK found that no more than 42% of them made significant use of what is an elementary practice³². As with all systems developed to address this issue, suggestion schemes have their limitations. In my experience, the biggest predictors of failure are

- A reluctance on the part of managers to take them seriously
- A tendency, in the face of initial setbacks or a lacklustre employee response, to give up rather than persevere
- An expectation of revolutionary new employee initiatives - immediately
- A slowness to respond to whatever ideas employees do produce, combined with a criticism that more hasn't been forthcoming

- The absence of even minimal rewards. As an example, a large aerospace company with which I worked had a long-standing and modestly successful suggestion scheme. Suggestions implemented attracted a small cash reward. Senior managers decided to eliminate the reward, since ‘it is employees’ job to provide suggestions, and they are paid for it already.’ Employees felt that their input was no longer appreciated, and the flow of suggestions dried up. Managers, meanwhile, concluded that employees weren’t interested in ‘the bigger picture.’

A more systematic, creative and persistent focus on this issue is clearly required. It is important that employees are fully involved in such efforts, rather than simply presented with senior management’s vision of the systems it thinks are required to produce it. Lessons can be drawn from General Electric’s famous ‘Work Out’ Program, where ‘a series of assemblies... brought together large cross-sections of a business unit to identify ways to dismantle bureaucracy.’³³ The program was a pivotal element in the company’s transformation. Its techniques could be adapted to address the feedback issues identified in this paper.

6. *Create ‘red flag’ mechanisms for the upward transmission of information that cannot be ignored.* Organisations rarely fail because they have inadequate information. But they will fail if vital information either does not reach the top, or is ignored when it gets there. It is clear, for example, that the spectacular bankruptcy of Enron occurred in spite of the fact that many people who worked for it fully realised the weakness of its position and the unethical nature of its practices. Another telling aspect of the Enron scandal was the fact that whistle blowing occurred. Leaking problems outside the organisation in this manner occurs when employees feel they cannot safely transmit

important but critical information via conventional organisational channels. To prevent such a state of affairs, it is important to create the type of mechanisms proposed in this paper. I give one example of a communication system that achieved its aim of facilitating clear upward communication, and thus ensured that important information reached the ears or desks it need to reach, in Table 3. Such systems have been found to help organisations make the transition from being merely good in their field to achieving sustained greatness³⁴. Organisations need to develop similar mechanisms, appropriate for their own circumstances, and rigorously pursue their implementation.

Insert Table 3 Here

7. *Existing communication processes should be reviewed to ensure that they include requirements to produce critical feedback.* With few exceptions, team briefings emphasise the transmission of information from the top to the bottom. This is akin to installing an elevator capable of travelling only in one direction - downwards. Team briefings should also include a specific requirement that problems and criticisms be reported up. Again, balance is vital. As already noted, exclusively critical feedback may be as damaging as exclusively positive feedback, and create a fearful climate dominated by the expectation of imminent catastrophe. No one can innovate, or even work with minimal effectiveness, if they confidently expect the imminent arrival of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Nevertheless, with that proviso in mind, most organisations are a long way from having to worry about the risk of too much critical feedback disturbing the tranquillity of those in top positions.

Targets should be set for critical feedback, and closely monitored. A culture change is required. In particular, managers who tell their people ‘Don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions’ need to reengineer their vocabulary. They are generating blackouts rather than illumination.

8. *Train supervisors to be open, receptive and responsive to employee dissent.*

When supervisors behave in such a manner they are signalling receptiveness to entire workgroups. However, training in the appropriate skills is often lacking. As with many other vital communication skills, it is frequently just assumed that managers will have access to the right tool kit. This optimistic assumption is unwarranted. Even if people have some notion of which tools are available to them, training is required so that they select the right one for each task. Otherwise, those trained only in how to use a hammer may instinctively reach out for it, even when a screwdriver is more appropriate for the job in hand. The lack of appropriate communication skills on the part of top managers is one of the main reasons for the disconnect so frequently noted between the inspiring rhetoric of strategic visions and the mundane operational reality³⁵.

9. *Power and status differentials should be eliminated or, where that is impossible, at least reduced.* I gave the example earlier of Enron’s ‘rank and yank’ system, designed among other things to instil fear and uncertainty into employees. But similar approaches are employed in up to 20% of US companies. I believe that such appraisal systems give managers far too much power over employees. Open communication becomes virtually impossible. They should be eliminated - at warp speed. More broadly, status differentials can be reduced by blitzing some of the most visible symbols of privilege, such as reserved parking, executive dining rooms and percentage salary increases far in excess of those obtained by other employees. A growing body of

research suggests that excessive and highly visible signs of executive privilege undermines organisational cohesion and effectiveness. In particular, it promotes an ‘us versus them’ mentality rather than one of ‘us against the competition’³⁶. The risks with addressing this question are few, but the potential gains are immense.

10. The CEO, in particular, needs to openly model a different approach to the receipt of critical communication, and ensure that senior colleagues emulate this openness.

Many studies have shown that when people are asked to gauge the efficacy of communication in general and the role of senior managers in particular they personalise the issue into the role of the CEO. My own audits of communication have also repeatedly found the same pattern. Organisations that take communication seriously are led by CEOs who take communication seriously. CEOs that are defensive, uncertain, closed to feedback and dismissive of contrary opinions may indeed get their way - in the short term. At the very least, they will be gratified by effusive public statements of compliance. But coerced compliance is usually combined with private defiance. Ultimately, it produces a fractious relationship between senior managers and their staff. And organisations where managers and employees are at war with each other, rather than the competition, cannot conquer new markets. Without a clear lead on communication at the level of the CEO, it is unlikely that progress on the issues discussed in this paper will be made.

SUMMARY – IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The issues raised in this paper are fundamental to the theory and practice of management. No one individual or any one group has a mastery of all the problems in

any company. The world is too complex. Given the constraints on the feedback they receive, many managers in fact have a poor grasp of their organisation's problems. Winston Churchill put it well: 'The temptation to tell a Chief in a great position the things he most likes to hear is one of the commonest explanations of mistaken policy. Thus the outlook of the leader on whose decision fateful events depend is usually far more sanguine than the brutal facts admit.'

In managerial terms, it follows that the search for solutions to problems that are multi-causal in nature requires creative input from people of varied managerial rank. In the diverse and pluralistic organisations of today, it is never possible to reach full agreement on important strategic issues. The only place where everyone agrees with everyone else on all vital issues is a cemetery. In the workplace, the inevitable debates and disagreements on strategy are best brought into the open, where they can be engaged by managers, rather than repressed, denied or ignored. The dialogic organisation will always be involved in discussion about strategic direction, including after decisions have been reached. Critical feedback, despite its frustrations, consistently offers fresh opportunities for evaluation. Such discussions sometimes expose differences that may appear insoluble. But the point is that such disagreements exist anyway. There seems little point in attempting to prohibit something that will proceed with or without the encouragement of managers. Rather, decision making and implementation will be improved if the inevitable debates that occur are brought into the open, rather than concealed from the view of senior managers.

From an academic perspective, issues of voice have attracted growing interest. But much remains to be done. In particular, we need to know more about how both

managers and employees make sense of their respective communication practices, of the impact that such practices have on bottom line performance, and of the effectiveness of efforts designed to create more robust critical upward communication. For example, it may be that the impulse towards ingratiation and flattery is so pronounced that it is activated by even the slightest intrusion of status differentials in the workplace. However, it is unlikely that such differentials can be completely eliminated. It is also far from clear how organisations can balance between the need for involvement, discussion and critical upward communication on the one hand, and the more rapid decision making and strategy formulation demanded by an increasingly competitive global marketplace. There is much empirical and theoretical work to be done.

But, in terms of practice, some things are already clear. Once environmental scanning reveals the existence of a problem or an opportunity, managers need to be able to engage their people in a debate on strategic direction. The design of strategies that will be implemented rather than ones that languish on shelves requires input from as wide a group of people as possible. Successful implementation requires buy in from all levels of the organisation. The communication lift must serve all floors. This means that managers must recognise the value of debate, dialogue and dissent, in all its inherent messiness. The difficulties in securing wide-spread involvement are obviously considerable. But they are challenges that must be met if an impregnable competitive advantage is to be built.

Table 1: The Impact and Benefits of Upward Feedback

- The promotion of shared leadership, and an enhanced willingness by managers to act on employee suggestions
- A greater tendency by employees to report positive changes in their managers' behaviour
- Actual rather than perceived improvements in management behaviour following on feedback, beyond what could be attributed to regression to the mean
- A reduced gap between managers' self-ratings and those of their subordinates
- The creation of improved forums for obtaining information, garnering suggestions, defusing conflict and facilitating the expression of discontent
- An enhancement of organisational learning
- Better decision-making - currently, it is estimated that about half of decision in organisations fail, largely because of insufficient participation and a failure to carry out an unrestricted search for solutions
- Enhanced participation

Table 2: Feedback Considerations**Reasons for Feedback-Seeking**

- High level of uncertainty and the desire to reduce it
- The goal of becoming competent in a task
- A wish to correct perceived errors in performance
- Wanting to regulate and improve one's performance

Factors that Influence the Decision to Seek Feedback

- The perceived credibility and expertise of the feedback source
- Receptivity of the source – the extent to which the person is likely to be available, and willing, to give considered feedback
- The importance of achieving a definite set target or goal
- Concern about *developing* rather than *demonstrating* competence
- Level of self-esteem – those higher in self-esteem seek more feedback
- Performance expectations - those with high expectations seek more feedback
- Going with the flow - if significant others are seeking feedback, the probability is that we will follow suit
- Tactics – we are more likely to ask for feedback if we think our performance is good, as this shows us in a good light

Potential Costs of Negative Feedback

- Damage to one's ego
- A less positive public image in the organisation
- The effort involved in having to change one's performance

Table 3: Creating Systems For Information Flow That Cannot Be Ignored³⁷

One researcher interviewed engineers at Marshall Space Flight Centre in the 1960s, when Werner von Braun was its director. Repeatedly, people told him that the communication device that worked best was ‘The Monday notes.’ This referred to a practice that had sprung up when von Braun had asked 24 key managers across several units to send him a one-page memo every Monday morning, in which they described the preceding week’s progress and problems. Von Braun read their comments, initialled them, and added his own questions, suggestions and praise. The collected notes were then arranged in the order of the authors’ names and returned as a package to all contributors. Closer investigation showed that the key managers involved had compiled their own Monday notes by asking their direct reports for a ‘Friday report’ about their activities. Some of them even organised meetings to gather the required information. Many of them also circulated von Braun’s eventual report back down the line. In short, a simple request had triggered a robust mechanism for the transmission of information, and ensured that whatever was contained in the Monday notes was acted upon rather than ignored.

In a cautionary coda, subsequent research into NASA has suggested that many of its later problems, including the catastrophic Challenger and Colombia explosions, partly resulted from systems such as the Monday notes falling into disuse. Deprived of critical feedback, senior managers developed over-optimistic views of what could be achieved. This heightened levels of risk, with disastrous consequences. The organisation has still to recover.

Table 4: Improving Critical Upward Communication: The Ten Commandments

1	<p>Experiment with both upward and 360-degree appraisal. <i>Can lead to further self-development, but requires patience, determination and a supportive atmosphere</i></p>
2	<p>Managers should familiarise themselves with the basics of ingratiation theory. <i>Appreciate that <u>no-one</u> is impervious to flattery- including/especially you!</i></p>
3	<p>Positive feedback should be subject to the same, or greater scrutiny, than negative feedback. <i>Seek a balance between positive and negative feedback. Instinctively mistrust positive feedback, and concentrate on problems and criticisms, their validity and solution</i></p>
4	<p>Managers should seek out opportunities for regular formal and informal contact with staff at all levels. <i>Seek honest, two-way communication by establishing informal contact with staff at all levels of your organisation</i></p>
5	<p>Promote systems for greater participation in decision-making. <i>A suggestion scheme, with worth-having rewards, should be first-base – something more systematic can follow</i></p>
6	<p>Create ‘red flag’ mechanisms for the upward transmission of information that cannot be ignored. <i>There must be some mechanism to ensure important or urgent problems are flagged up to the highest level. Whistle blowing is evidence of the complete failure of upward communication. But unless you provide channels for upward communication it is likely to occur – with disastrous public relations consequences.</i></p>
7	<p>Existing communication processes should be reviewed to ensure that they include requirements to produce critical feedback. <i>Communication systems should allow information to travel in both directions, and should enable responsive action. They should be constantly reviewed, to ensure that critical as well as positive feedback reaches the top.</i></p>
8	<p>Train supervisors to be open, receptive and responsive to employee dissent. <i>Give them the vital communication tools, encourage them to do the job and reward them when they do.</i></p>
9	<p>Power and status differentials should be eliminated or, where that is impossible, at least reduced. <i>Open upward communication cannot coexist with penal appraisal systems, and will be discouraged by a culture in which status differentials are overtly displayed.</i></p>
10	<p>The CEO, in particular, needs to openly model a different approach to the receipt of critical communication, and ensure that senior colleagues emulate this openness. <i>The CEO must ‘walk the talk’, and personify what s/he wishes to foster.</i></p>

Endnotes

¹ The importance of securing a wider input into strategy formulation is discussed by Hay, M., and Williamson, P (1997) Good strategy: the view from below, *Long Range Planning*, 30, 651-664. The role of scanning, including internally, is the main theme of a paper by Day, G., and Schoemaker, P. (2004) Driving through the fog: Managing at the edge, *Long Range Planning*, 37, 127-142.

² This research has been reported in detail in a number of publications. Communication audits involve the quantitative and qualitative analysis of communication climate in its broadest sense, including an evaluation of who is communicating with whom, about what issues, through which channels and with what effects. The results of eight major Audits in the British National Health Service, involving samples of many thousands of employees, are reported in Tourish, D., and Hargie, O., (1998) Communication between managers and staff in the NHS: trends and prospects, *British Journal of Management*, 9, 53-71. The results of a specific investigation into critical upward communication in a further European health care organisation that employed over 8000 people are reported in. Tourish, D., and Robson, P. (2003) Critical upward feedback in organisations: Processes, problems and implications for communication management, *Journal of Communication Management*, 8, 150-167. I also draw several examples from this organisation, in the current paper. Several case study chapters in a major book that I co-edited on the subject also explore the nature of communication audits, how they connect to organisational strategy, and the findings that typically emerge (see Hargie, O., and

Tourish, D. (2000) (Eds.) *Handbook of Communication Audits for Organisations*, London: Routledge.

³ For example, Weick and Ashford convincingly argue that organisational learning is much facilitated by a climate of open discussion, while Nutt has established that one of the drivers behind the high failure rate of most managerial decisions is an absence of discussion in general and critical feedback in particular. See Weick, K., and Ashford, S. (2001) Learning in Organisations, In F. Jablin and S. Ashford (Eds.) *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*, London: Sage (pp.704-731); Nutt, P. (2002) *Why Decisions Fail: Avoiding the Blunders and traps that Lead to Debacles*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

⁴ This research is exhaustively reviewed in Seibold, D., and Shea, B. (2001) Participation and decision making, In F. Jablin, and L. Putnam (Eds.) *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*, London: Sage.

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⁶ O'Reilly, C., Chatman, J., and Anderson, J. (1987) 'Message flow and decision making'. In F. Jablin, L. Putnam, K. Roberts and L. Porter (Eds.) *Handbook of Organizational Communication*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

⁷ Much of this evidence is reviewed in Deetz, S., and Brown, D., (2004) Conceptualising involvement, participation and workplace decision processes: A communication theory perspective, In D. Tourish and O. Hargie (Eds.) *Key Issues in Organizational Communication*, London: Routledge. A useful discussion of

communication in the context of employee participation can also be found in

Marchington, M., and Wilkinson, A, (2000) A Direct Participation, In S. Bach and K. Sisson, (Eds.) *Personnel Management: A comprehensive guide to theory and practice* (3rd Edition), Oxford: Blackwell.

⁸ Weick, K., and Ashford, S. (2001, p.716) 'Learning in organizations', In F. Jablin, and L. Putnam (Eds.) *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*, London: Sage.

⁹ Ashford, S., and Tsui, A. (1991) 'Self-regulation for managerial effectiveness: The role of active feedback seeking', *Academy of Management Journal* 34: 251-280.

¹⁰ Starbuck, W., Greve, A., and Hedberg, B. (1978, p.118) 'Responding to crisis', *Journal of Business Administration* 9: 111-137.

¹¹ Morrison, E. (2002) 'Information seeking within organizations', *Human Communication Research* 28: 229-242.

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¹⁴ Bevan, J. (2001) *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*, London: Profile Books.

¹⁵ De Vries, M., F., R. (2001, p.94) *The Leadership Mystique*, London: Financial Times/ Prentice-Hall.

¹⁶ Fusaro, P., and Miller, R. (2002) *What Went Wrong at Enron*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.

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¹⁸ Andriopoulos, C. (2003) Six paradoxes in managing creativity: An embracing act, *Long Range Planning*, 36, 375-388.

¹⁹ Brown, A. (1997, p.643) Narcissism, identity, and legitimacy, *Academy of Management Review* 22: 643-686.

²⁰ This research is discussed in Heller, F. (1998) Influence at work: a 25-year programme of research, *Human Relations*, 51, 1425-1444. The quotation here can be found on p.1425.

²¹ Dawes, R. (2001) *Everyday Irrationality*, New York: Westview.

²² A typical example of this research can be found in Baron, R. (1996) "La vie en rose" revisited: Contrasting perceptions of informal upward feedback among managers and subordinates', *Management Communication Quarterly* 9: 338-348. Researchers in Britain have also found massive discrepancies between the perceptions of managers and staff on the levels of information provided and levels of consultation successfully achieved. See Cully, M., Woodland, S., O'Reilly, A., and Dix, G. (1998) *Britain at Work*, London: Routledge.

²³ Pratto, F., and John, O. (1991) 'Automatic vigilance: The attention grabbing power of negative social information', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51: 380-391.

²⁴ Waldron, V., and Krone, K. (1991) 'The experience and expression of emotion in the workplace: A study of a corrections organization.' *Management Communication Quarterly*, 4: 287-309.

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²⁶ Brown, R. (2000) *Group Processes* (2nd Edition), Oxford: Blackwell.

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³² O'Creevy, M. (2001) 'Employee involvement and the middle manager: saboteur or scapegoat?' *Human Resource Management Journal* 11: 24-40.

³³ Sull, D., (2003) *Revival of the Fittest: Why Good Companies Go Bad and How Great Managers Remake Them*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

³⁴ The role of 'red flag' mechanisms in this regard is particularly well discussed in Collins, J. (2001) *Good to Great*, London: Random House Business Books.

³⁵ The nature of this disconnection, and useful ideas on how to overcome it, is discussed more fully by Coulson-Thomas, C. (1992) Strategic vision or strategic con?: Rhetoric or reality, *Long Range Planning*, 25, 81-89.

³⁶ The work of Jeffrey Pfeffer is particularly notable in this regard. He identifies the reduction of status differentials, and the limiting of top pay relative to the earnings of the organisation's other employees, as one of the top seven practices of successful organisations. Pfeffer cites extensive data which shows that the most effective CEOs and the best performing companies, such as South West Airlines, invest a great deal

of attention to this question. See Pfeffer, J. (1998) *The Human Equation*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, for full discussion.

³⁷ This account of the ‘Monday notes system’ is drawn from the work of Tompkins, P. (2005) *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia - The Decline of the Space Program: A Study in Organizational Communication*, Los Angeles: Roxbury. Tompkins later revisited the NASA issue, and his detailed account of how its earlier effective communication systems fell into disrepair can also be found in this book.