

Here's a larger example: The computer-chip clean-room engineers were baffled by high dust contamination on the chips they produced.

They measured the levels of contamination but, I learned, put the measurements in a drawer and never had the stomach to follow their own data. (This information came from interviews with low-level workers who knew all along what was causing the contamination but had never been consulted.)

One more: A local high-tech firm enjoyed a worldwide reputation for quality products, but underneath, the three owners of the corporation argued viciously and personally during their management meetings.

They sabotaged one another's decisions. They kept fighting, and profits fell. The owners hated the workplace they had created and ceaselessly blamed one another for the experience, while denying their own culpability for the difficulties.

It's common practice in corporations to maintain a perpetual "experience distortion machine" where members are subtly or directly discouraged from telling the truth about what goes on there. Thus, it's no large leap into vastly ungrounded schemes that common sense and honest discussion would reject.

In classic methods of organizational development, functional CEOs and boards reverse this pervasive denial strategy and instead are energetic and brave about gathering real experiential data from a representative slice of the corporation's world.

They make it safe for people to speak up in structured, responsive forms of information gathering, and they take that information as better gold than any consultant or regulator or politician could provide. When they institutionalize listening and responding to what they're told, they not only head off self-serving catastrophes like Enron, they put in place a persistent feedback loop that absolutely increases their profits and the satisfaction of all the stakeholders in the setting.

They all profit from telling the truth. What a concept! When American businesses want to really become patriotic as well as profitable, they'll shift into serving the larger task at hand here. It's not too late to institutionalize the telling of the truth in the workplace.

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