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GUEST OPINION

The institutionalized denial of experience

By Carlton F. "Perk" Clark
SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

There are enough fingers pointing now in the Enron story to suggest we have several handfuls of causality to dole out. However, the postmortem we need to conduct is not only on an important American bankruptcy.

It is on a kind of organizational practice in vogue for decades.

When I'm consulting to a business, I refer to this phenomenon as "the institutionalized denial of experience." It involves formal and informal ways of preventing the expression of what's true in the organization. The higher you go, the more the game is played.

In every news story about Enron, you can hear the phenomenon described in painful clarity.

When an institution shows it is uninterested in the actual experience of the managers, stockholders and workers there, it cuts itself off from vital information. Example: The dentist who hired me because of his falling profits was convinced he was skilled at participatory management, but I watched him hover over employees, micromanage them and get angry when he was criticized.

They confirmed this in our confidential interviews. When I described this to him, he fired me. His employees later "accidentally" left some equipment turned on over the weekend and thus destroyed many records and much equipment in his dental practice.

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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