
Unleashing Human Capability in Organisations

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Unleashing human capability can significantly increase organisational capability and performance, and is an emerging critical success factor for surviving today's turbulent business environment. In the past decade, organisations are beginning to move from a hierarchical 'command and control' structure, to becoming more decentralised, viewing people as one of their greatest competitive advantages. This report firstly provides a comprehensive literature review of the current mechanisms leaders use to unleash human capability in today's organisations. Secondly, a 'hack' is provided suggesting an innovative way that truth telling can be encouraged within organisations to promote trust and reduce fear.

1. Table of Contents

1. Table of Contents	2
2. Introduction	3
3. Unleashing Human Capability: A Prerequisite of survival... ..	4
4. Leadership Considerations	6
5. Innovation.....	8
6. Culture.....	9
7. Learning & Knowledge Sharing	11
8. Team Effectiveness.....	12
9. Empowerment	14
10. Conclusions & Recommendations.....	15
11. The Hack.....	16
12. References.....	22

2. Introduction

In today's business environment, leaders are confronted with a plethora of challenges: globalisation; increasing environmental concerns; emerging markets and competitors; the frenetic pace of technology; changing demographics (Bracksick, 2007); changing economic markets; and outsourcing (King and Wright, 2007).

The business environment is changing so fast that many businesses fail, not necessarily because of fault or mediocrity, but because they were not adaptive to their environment and the rigidity of their business model caused catastrophic failure (Doz and Kosonen, 2010). Even worse, today's business challenges can create a 'just do it' approach to be taken by business leaders, which largely disregards any repercussions to employees (King and Wright, 2007).

The necessity to remain innovative and competitive is a business imperative. According to Beer and Eisenstat (2010, p. 598) 'organisations will have to learn to reformulate strategy and realign their organisations continuously, if they are to survive in an increasingly turbulent environment'. This continual adaption is dependent on two critical factors: people and leadership (Bracksick, 2007).

The performance (and survival) of an organisation is predicated on the ability of its people. Unleashing human capability is therefore a critical success factor, not just for growth, but to survive the turbulent business environment. Simply put, there is a symbiotic relationship between human capability and the overall organisation capability – if human capability increases, so does the capability of the organisation.

This report contains a review of current literature on how to increase human capability, specifically to increase organisational performance. The report takes a generalist leadership approach, (rather than a specialist HR approach) providing a commentary on the common tools in the leaders 'toolbox' that can be used to unleash human capability. These tools include: leadership, innovation, culture, learning and knowledge sharing, team and empowerment.

3. Unleashing Human Capability: A Prerequisite of survival...

Defining Capability

In a generalist sense, capability is defined as ‘the quality of being capable; a characteristic that may be developed; potential aptitude’ (World English Dictionary, 2010). The aim of this report is to put this definition into a business context and outline what tools leaders can use to unleash capability in employees.

Ulrich and Wiersema provide a suitable framework for the purpose of this report. They define capability as a ‘firms ability to establish internal structures and processes (i.e. employees) that create firm-specific competencies and enable it to adapt to changing external pressures’ (1989, p. 119). The key essence of capability is the focus on the internal environment of the firm which modifies how it responds to the growing number of external challenges.

The Importance of People

Traditionally, to increase capability, companies have employed top-down initiatives such as Six Sigma, Total Quality Management, and more recently, programs such as reengineering. However benefits from these programs have largely not exceeded the investment (both financial and human) made in them (Beer and Eisenstat, 2010). According to King and Wright (2007), nearly two thirds of these programs fail to produce the desired results, primarily due to the little consideration given to HR issues. This lack of focus causes ‘greater employee resistance, slower adoption rates, higher costs, limited resources and project failure’ (King and Wright, 2007, p. 57). In addition Bracksick (2007) believes that within organisations, people’s behaviour is “locked”, as they are constrained by systems and cultural norms that maintain minimum standards of performance.

It is obvious that both the success and the biggest constraint of increasing capability (or merely survival) is the talent and the execution of HR strategies (Gandossy and Verma, 2009; Heskett and Schlesinger, 1997). This ideal is best surmised by Bracksick (2007, p.2) who states ‘in any organisation, nothing can improve until people change their behaviour’.

People as a competitive advantage

Traditionally, competitive advantages were gained or lost through the exploitation of technology. Unfortunately, most technological advantage is short lived as competitors replicate technological advancements, resulting in technology parity until the next breakthrough occurs (Fawcett, Brau, Rhoads and Whitlark, 2008). Because of this, organisations are now focussing on their employees as a vital source of competitive advantage as a means to differentiate themselves from the competition (Bolino, Valcea and Harvey, 2010; Fawcett et al, 2008).

4. Leadership Considerations

Role of leader

Leaders are the most influential people within an organisation, and innovative leadership is the best “silver bullet” leaders’ possess to unleash human capability (Carnell, 2008; Farrell, Flood, Curtain, Hannigan, Dawson and West, 2004). Furthermore, Bel (2010) asserts that the leader’s role is to inspire people – to generate new ideas, provide a vision and strategy, and build the context and culture to support employees within the organisation.

Whilst there are a plethora of roles leaders generally fulfil, in order to unleash human capability it is recommended that leaders: set outrageously high goals while providing the necessary resources; fully empower employees (Heskett and Schlesinger, 1997); and freely communicate with employees, sharing information on both what, and why action is necessary (Ulrich and Wiersema, 1989). The leader’s ability to excel at managing and engaging employees will result in outperforming the competition (Bracksick, 2007).

Shared Leadership

Traditionally vertical leadership models which relied on hierarchical structures and management were prevalent. However, recent literature suggests that leadership can be a collective endeavour that is shared, spreading leadership behaviour to lower levels in the organisation to substantially increase the companies adaptability and ability to implement change (Leslie and Canwell, 2010; Mohrman and Worley, 2009; Pearce, 2004).

Leaders are often caught in a paradoxical situation. Whilst they understand that authoritarian control will stifle creativity and innovation, leaders often believe shared leadership means losing control (Pearce, 2004). However, research has shown that organisations which cultivate leadership capability throughout the organisation, (especially when tasks are highly interdependent, complex, or require creativity), will be well positioned to not only weather any storm, but also increase the capability of the organisation (Gandossy and Verma, 2009; Mohrman et al, 2009; Pearce, 2004).

Leadership Style

The style of leadership that top management possess has become an increasingly important dimension in overcoming today's business challenges as well as increasing human capability and innovation (Chen, 2007).

Whilst there are multiple leadership styles, (including directive, transactional, and authentic leadership), literature suggests that transformational leadership produces the strongest and positive link to increasing change, innovation and human capability (Chen, 2007; McShane and Travaglione, 2009; Pearce, 2004).

Transformational leaders are change agents who transform organisations by firstly setting clear values and vision. Secondly, through increasing employee participation, trust, encouragement and empowerment, they inspire and motivate employees to higher levels of performance, often beyond expectations (Chen, Hwang and Liu, 2009; Farrell et al, 2004; McShane and Travaglione, 2009; Williams, Parker and Turner, 2010).

Transformational leadership is a catalyst for greater flexibility in an organisation (Ulrich and Wiersema, 1989), and due to the effect on interpersonal norms, transformational leaders have a significant impact on proactivity and innovation of its employees (Williams et al, 2010).

5. Innovation

An organisations ability to innovate increases capability as it enables an accelerated rate of response to the business environment, making it a core driver for both growth and performance (Barsh, Capozzi and Davidson, 2008), and also a key driver of competitiveness (Dervitsiotis, 2010). The two important prerequisites for innovation are leadership (people) and organisational culture (Barsh et al, 2008; Dervitsiotis, 2010). It is also recommended that innovation processes are embedded throughout the organisation and not left to single individuals to drive (Bel, 2010).

Whilst innovation needs to be embedded throughout the entire organisation, the entire leadership team have an active role in facilitating and creating the right environment for innovation to prosper. The more senior the leadership, the more power they possess to promote and drive innovation (Bel, 2010; Marques, 2006). Innovation needs to be integrated at a strategic level with senior leaders, and pushed out to innovative talent or teams to implement. Further, leaders need to be held accountable for encouraging innovation and foster a trust based culture among employees (Barsh et al, 2008). Increasing capability through innovation is dependent on establishing a team of diverse “innovation leaders” across different functions and levels in an organisation Bel (2010).

A leader’s ability to promote innovation is an important first step in amplifying imagination throughout the organisation.

6. Culture

The culture of an organisation has a profound effect on the organisations ability to unleash capability. Any culture that inhibits innovation, such as command and control, hierarchical, bureaucratic or fear based environments, will be strong obstacles for achieving maximum potential and capability of employees (Barsh et al, 2008; Jarrar and Zairi, 2002). These cultures are intolerant of failure and sap the organisation (and employees) of the necessary resources to promote innovation (Barsh et al, 2008).

Dervitsiotis (2010) believes that the organisation's culture establishes the environment for promoting creative talent and engages employees by providing them with the opportunity for creative interactions with internal and external sources.

There are several key attributes that are necessary in an organisations culture to promote capability. There must be an openness to experiment with new ideas coinciding with a willingness to take risks (Barsh et al, 2008; Dervitsiotis, 2010). Strongly linked to risk taking is a requirement to be tolerant of failure. According to Farrell, et al, (2004, p. 24) 'where a culture of creativity and participation is encouraged, team members are more likely to suggest new ideas without the fear of criticism'. The culture must also support diversity, promote a willingness to cooperate and share information freely and involve employees in decision making (Barsh et al, 2008; Dervitsiotis, 2010). However, the most important attribute suggested by literature is trust.

According to Wong and Cummings (2009, p. 7), 'trust is considered the foundation of positive organisational cultures and, in essence, defines healthy work places'. Furthermore, Darin Drabing, COO of Forest Lawn Memorial Parks and Mortuaries, (cited in Pearce, 2004, p.52) states 'it's all about trust - without trust there is no hope of developing shared leadership'.

Trust is the ingredient that enables the active sharing of knowledge and enhancement of communication, creating loyal relationships between peers that eliminates negative behaviours such as deception and blaming others for failures (Kim and Lee, 2006). Organisations that possess a high trust culture also exhibit

higher job performance and satisfaction, and increased citizenship behaviour and organisational commitment (Wong and Cummings, 2009).

Ensuring the organisation has a “culture of trust” is a way of enlarging the circle of trust and reducing fear in an organisation.

The advantage of establishing the right culture is best summarised by Ray and Elder (2007, p.28) who state ‘high performance organisations aren’t necessarily smarter, or better trained or equipped; they just waste less energy on mistrust, conflict and goal confusion’.

Whilst the goal of creating the right culture is to capture employees emotions and engagement to produce an urgency for action (Bruch and Ghoshal, 2003), Fawcett, et al (2008) warn that many organisations fail to cultivate a culture that leverages employee’s passion, creativity or insight.

7. Learning & Knowledge Sharing

The ability for organisations to adopt organisational learning has been well documented as a competitive advantage leading to higher performance, as well as being a key for survival (Farrell et al, 2004). Farrel et al, (2004, p. 25) define learning as the 'ability of the firm to create, combine, exchange and exploit knowledge and information',

In order to unleash human capability, Yeo (2002) suggests that a destruction of barriers towards leaning must be undertaken in order to broaden access to new sources of experience and knowledge. Research conducted by Reynolds and Ablett (1988) (cited in Yeo, 2002), suggests that learning should become a daily activity.

Closely related to organisational learning is the concept of knowledge sharing. Lee, Gillespie, Mann, and Wearing define knowledge sharing 'as the exchange or explicit and tacit knowledge relevant to the task' (2010, p. 474). Knowledge sharing requires both dissemination and collaboration of information between individuals within and between organisations and external agencies (Kim and Lee, 2006).

The ability for an organisation to be able to share knowledge is an important factor that leads to superior team performance and greater organisational agility (Lee et al, 2010; Kim and Lee, 2006). A credible solution to provide the opportunity for greater knowledge sharing is through formal interactions either within or across teams in the organisation.

There are four main reasons why knowledge sharing leads to improved performance. Firstly, more information and better use of knowledge leads to improved decision making. Secondly, diversity of ideas and opinions leads to better problem solving. Thirdly diversity and knowledge enhances creativity (Lee et al, 2010), and finally, the combination of the three leads to delivering more value while consuming fewer resources (Mohrman and Worley, 2009).

Despite the numerous benefits from knowledge sharing, the biggest impediment is conflict avoidance. This is especially prevalent in group behaviour where the cardinal

rule is to minimise conflict, even at the expense of improving performance (Ray and Elder, 2007).

8. Team Effectiveness

Most companies have vertical accountability, incorporating a top-down chain of command model. However this model tends to ensure compliance rather than establishing any tangible commitment to achieving organisational goals. Shifting to horizontal accountability allows organisations to build a team-based approach, where information is communicated across the organisation in order to solve problems and build wider accountability (Pearce, 2004; Ray and Elder, 2007).

Teams are defined as groups of two or more interdependent individuals who assume collective and mutual responsibility for achieving common goals aligned with organisational objectives (McShane and Travaglione, 2009; Williams, et al, 2010).

Establishing high performing teams is vital for unleashing human capability within organisations. Teams perpetuate an innovation cycle, by sharing knowledge and cross fertilising ideas enabling organisations to create more value without increasing resources (Barsh, et al, 2008). Teamwork also benefits the organisation by creating a family atmosphere, which greatly aids in the development of creativity, innovation and productivity (Fawcett, et al, 2008).

Team members also gain advantages from team work. Advantages include: variation of tasks; improved feedback; higher task significance and identity; and the most important advantage is in the increase in autonomy that team members gain from their input (Williams, et al, 2010).

There are a number of ways to increase the outcomes of team performance to unleash organisational capability. Barsh et al (2008) suggests that cross fertilising ideas enables leaders to gain more value without increasing resources. Ulrich and Wiersema (1989) suggest that teams should be established to run in parallel, and when required, compete against other for access to scarce resources. Finally,

leaders can consider team composition and the diversity that each member contributes to the team. Although there is still some debate on whether homogeneous or heterogeneous teams are more productive, it is accepted that homogeneity creates an atmosphere of compatibility as team members share common personalities. The general premise is that 'performance can be improved by diversity when each team member adds unique attributes that are necessary for the team to be successful' (Williams et al, 2010, p. 308).

9. Empowerment

In order to unleash human capability, this report has introduced the idea that employees are a source of competitive advantage and that they should share leadership roles and contribute through teamwork. The final employee centric activity that can unleash capability is empowerment.

Empowerment involves allowing employees greater levels of authority, autonomy, freedom and responsibility, to tap into their creative energy to proactively engage them to meet organisational challenges (Chen, 2007; Hakimi, Knippenberg and Giessner, 2010; Mohrman and Worley, 2009).

In order for empowerment to be effective in unleashing capability, both the company mission and the means to pursue this must be broadly distributed throughout the organisation (Mohrman et al, 2009). It is also important that employees realise change is an ongoing process, and not a short term issue to be resolved (Ulrich and Wiersema, 1989). Likewise, employees should participate in making decisions, be assigned accountability, and be rewarded through suitable performance systems (Jarrar and Zairi, 2002; Ulrich and Wiersema, 1989).

Jarrar and Zairi (2002, p, 268) best encapsulate the potential of empowerment to unleash capability in an organisation. They state, 'employees should have responsibility and authority to break the rules to enable excellent service and total customer satisfaction... advocating the need to change habit patterns, break familiar rhythms, and turn stones which should not be turned....these habits, rhythms, stones have somehow evolved into rules.'

The biggest impediment to empowerment is a leaders inability to relinquish control, especially when their own career progression and job security is at stake. The importance of reciprocal trust cannot be overstated (Hakimi, et al, 2010). Bolino, Valcea and Harvey (2010) also introduce a "dark side" of empowerment, suggesting that it can be a source of employee stress, be harmful if not properly guided, and create friction between employees that have a high or low proactiveness.

10. Conclusions & Recommendations

In order for an organisation to be successful with the plethora of challenges that exist in today's business environment, it is critical that employees are innovative and adaptable (King and Wright, 2007). It is people, rather than technology, that are becoming increasingly important and leading organisations are viewing employees as a genuine source of competitive advantage.

A leader's ability to unleash human capability is a prerequisite for organisational survival as human capability is inextricably linked to organisational capability and performance.

For leaders to effectively unleash human capability in organisations, the current management and leadership literature reviewed in this report suggests the following:

- A leader's primary purpose is to inspire people and leadership should be shared throughout the organisation. The transformational leadership style works best to support empowerment, innovation and motivation.
- Innovation is dependent on leadership and organisational culture. While leaders provide the environment for innovation to prosper, the responsibility must be pushed out through the organisation.
- The culture of an organisation cannot inhibit innovation. The culture should promote creativity and employee engagement. Trust is the key attribute of organisational culture.
- Learning and knowledge sharing creates diversity and knowledge which leads to higher creativity.
- Establishing high performing teams increases innovation and creativity through knowledge sharing and cross fertilisation of ideas.
- Empowerment should give employees the ability to break habits and rhythms, and over turn stones that have evolved into 'rules' over time.

11. The Hack

Can Your Organisation “Handle the Truth?”

Summary

‘The truth – you can’t handle the truth’ bellows the General in the aptly named film ‘A Few Good Men’. But the sentiment isn’t restricted to a movie. Why is truth telling so difficult within organisations? Yet truth telling is the vital component of trust, and without trust, how can organisations function effectively, let alone, unleash human capability?

Yet for the importance of truth, it is generally not taught in business studies papers, and normally is hidden away in an ethics paper where the moral fibre of leaders is discussed. Also lacking are any widely known or used tools to actively promote and encourage truth telling within organisations.

The purpose of this hack is to present a model that will actively encourage truth telling to occur within teams, departments or organisations. Leaders are role models for subordinates and it’s common to describe their status as living in a ‘glass house’ or ‘fishbowl’... So why not put them in one and observe what happens?

Moonshot(s)

Unleash capability – Increase Trust Reduce Fear

Problem

Leaders are sometimes like the Emperor from the Hans Christian Andersen story, The Emperors Clothes. Their view can be so distorted and misaligned to the truth (i.e. walking naked believing they are wearing the finest garment). The senior management team around the leader keep silent – a classic example of groupthink (i.e., like the Emperors ministers who did not want to be seen as unfit for their position or stupid). But often employees in an organisation know, and can see the

truth (as the child in the crowd called out to the Emperor that he was wearing nothing at all).

Where the analogy stops is that employees don't often have the courage to speak up in organisations. What's interesting about the Emperor story is that once the truth had been spoken, the entire crowd could see the truth. All it took was one person to speak.

The problem is it is difficult to speak truth to power. All human behaviour is biologically predicated on gaining pleasure or avoiding pain. Sometimes avoiding the truth is our way of avoiding pain. Employees fear the repercussions of speaking truth to power, especially when their livelihood (remuneration, promotion) is tied to the organisation. There is a Moroccan proverb that sums this up: 'If you've come to tell the truth, you'd better have a good horse outside the door'.

Every organisation has mokita's (a New Guinean word that means 'a truth everybody knows but nobody speaks'). Exposing these mokita's publically in an open forum and addressing them is critical to unleashing human capability. Often these mokita's become 'road blocks' that insidiously affect the organisational culture and prohibit the organisation from functioning at full capacity.

The reality is most organisations have devised subtle mechanisms for blocking the truth.

- Organisations care more for the hard numbers and less about the 'soft' people issues. They know that 'soft stuff' is important, but either give lip service, or don't have any tools in their tool box on how to engage in meaningful conversation. But the point is that the 'soft stuff' is often an early warning system for the difficult truths, which if left uncovered, affect the culture and health of the organisation.
- Organisations also adopt hierarchical insulation – where typically layers in the hierarchy discuss issues only amongst people within same layer. This leads to the 'rose glass' syndrome, where they only see what they are told, and aren't receiving rich information from dialogue with employees outside of their layer in the hierarchical structure.

Truth telling can be uncomfortable. It can create conflicts and drudges up emotions and 'unspoken truths' that most people would prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. However, to adapt a Biblical principle: 'The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off' (quote: Gloria Steinem).

Solution

With truth telling and trust being inextricably linked, and a key cornerstone to unleashing capability, there are limited models available on how to engage employees in the practice of truth telling.

The solution is to suggest a model that can actively engage employees in creative exercises to enforce truth telling as habit.

The Idea: "Truth Telling Fishbowl"

This is best done in groups of people that loosely work together (team, department, executive etc). The key requirement is that the group's hierarchy leadership is present and participating.

A fishbowl has 2 groups of people:

- The management – who form the active participants inside the fishbowl
- The team members – who form the observers outside the fishbowl

Organise an empty room, assembling two circles of chairs, one large outer circle representing the outside of the fishbowl, and an inner circle of chairs for active participants to sit within the fishbowl.

The process is as follows:

- Normally most senior management of the group sit inside the fishbowl circle
- There is also one empty chair in the inner circle for a 'guest' from the outer circle to join the inner circle.

- This 'guest' is able to ask any question they choose
- As many members of the inner circle can respond to fully answer the question
- The 'guest' does not leave the fishbowl until they are totally satisfied with the answers given. There can be free flowing discussion.
- Then next 'guest' enters the fishbowl (and the process repeats).
- Observers outside the fishbowl are not allowed to interject or comment. Instead they have a survey and fill in 'insights' from the conversation. Such questions could include:
 - What did you hear?
 - What is urgently calling for our attention?
 - Were you surprised by any statements or points of view?
 - Is our organisation / department ignoring, denying or minimising any warning signs of potential trouble ahead?
 - Do you have any gnawing questions or concerns after hearing what was said?
- At the completion of the fishbowl, there is an open sharing time when each question is revisited and the entire group can discuss what their impressions were from the comments made in the survey.

The rules of the fishbowl are as follows:

- No comments from outside the fishbowl
- Trust is a must. 'Between these four rules apply'
- No emotional flaring allowed. Constructive not personal comments.

Practical Impact

If all participants openly engage in the concept of the fishbowl (and are indeed truthful), then the group (team, department, or organisation) can expect the following positive impacts:

- Group members are exposed to senior leaders, and hear information firsthand – eliminating grapevine / gossip
- Better organisational decisions – management can hear firsthand the ideas and concerns of employees on the shop floor (and often these ideas are the best).
- The one on one interaction within the fishbowl is media rich – observers are able to pick up on both verbal and non-verbal cues. Observers will be able to sense if the truth is being told.

- It opens communication – which greatly enhances learning and knowledge sharing. It eliminates innuendo, false assumptions and goal confusion. Observers can 'hear it from the horse's mouth'.
- It can lead to innovative behaviour – essentially from the knowledge sharing, but also that different individuals will take different interpretations from what they heard. These will be applied differently (capturing diversity) and the flow on effect is more innovation.
- It will radically change organisation culture – The openness of 'we have nothing to hide' through to the sense of involvement and empowerment.
- Massive impact on team building and effectiveness – able to observe how people think, how they react, what their values are, what are the hot buttons etc Observers can gain more knowledge about fellow team members in one hour of a fishbowl than months of working alongside them.
- Leads to more constructive discussion. Less secret agendas. Less power plays. Active listening. Mutual respect.

Challenges

By far the biggest challenge is not to allow the fishbowl to become a shark tank! There is to be no shooting of the messenger.

It also requires top management engagement and total commitment.

- Need to want to seek the truth, not just pay lip service to it
- Need to be totally honest with yourself
- No place for egos (personal) secret agendas (organisational)

Truth telling also requires the need for truth listening...which is the ability to hear some inconvenient truths (which may personally affect you) without judgement or believing they are a criticism.

Truth telling requires the breaking of habits, norms that have established over time. These typically include:

- Denial – which is the need not to know – bad news that threatens the status quo – truths often lead the company away from a known, stable and comfortable position.
- Organisational biases – stereotyping, projection bias, primacy and regency effect. Management need to be receptive to breaking down firmly held biases that have become almost set in stone.

First Steps

Senior leadership engagement is essential for this concept to work effectively.

The concept requires a pre-meeting to explain the purpose and the objectives of the fishbowl. An explanation of the 'rules', as well as encouraging employees to ask without fear, and refrain from asking personally motivated questions.

Suggest that the first fishbowl session has 'anonymous questions' submitted in writing and an independent person assumes the role of 'guest' to ask the questions. This will allow the observers to view the fishbowl process and overcome the natural fear and inhibitions that they will have.

There a couple of warm up exercises that can be performed to ready participants (both active and observers) for the fishbowl. There are:

- The idea is to form small groups of two to four people and formulate a list of questions such as: Name three things you wish this company to be, but are not yet?; Name three things we once were, but are no longer?; What truths or realities is this company trying to avoid? etc. The game is called Rules of Dia-Log. (Dia=between and logos = truth - i.e. the truth is found in conversations that pass between us). Members each answer the questions in turn and observers need to: Listen without judgement; Realise that different people have different views; Listen to truly understand what is being said; Practice W.A.I.T (i.e Why Am I Talking?) – don't comment on what someone is saying – when people don't feel judged they will tell you so much more.
- Another exercise is to ask groups to make a list of mokita's (a truth no one speaks) that are relevant for the organisation. Get back into a larger group and share the results.

Credits

To my mentor, David Oldfield

Helpful Materials

http://thinkexist.com/quotation/lying_is_done_with_words_and_also_with_silence/222004.html

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