

## 8

## Acknowledge the Presence of Fear

As with any process of change, people are likely to go through a series of stages in their understanding of fear and their commitment to reversing its negative patterns. These can be diagramed as shown in Figure 8.1. This chapter is specifically focused around the first three steps of the scale. It highlights the importance of early work that builds awareness and overcomes denial. Like other workplace changes, making a course correction with fear requires that people understand the problem and see it happening around them. Once fear's presence has been acknowledged, planning for and implementing a new course of action can begin.

We present four primary strategies in this chapter that will help you to begin to reverse the patterns of fear. Grid 8.1 summarizes them and their impact.

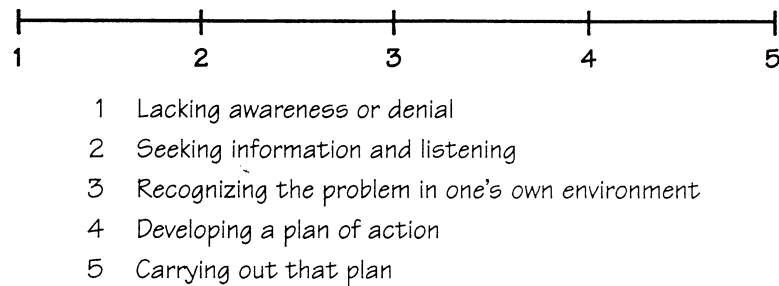


Figure 8.1. Points of Awareness and Action.

## Learn About Workplace Fears

Fear cannot be changed into trust unless organizational leaders consciously decide to behave in ways that will turn around the negative patterns. To do this, we recommend that you start with yourself. As you increase your personal understanding of fear and its impact, two things will happen. First, you will be better positioned to help others build that same awareness. Second, your proactive leadership in acknowledging fear's presence will serve as a model for others in the organization.

*Learn from your own experiences with workplace fears.* Patterns discovered by reflecting on personal experience can be powerful teachers. To see some of your own patterns:

1. Make a list of five times you wanted to speak about something but hesitated to do so.
2. For each situation, ask yourself these questions:
  - "How recent was the situation?"
  - "What factors contributed to my hesitation?"
  - "In the end, did I speak up?"
  - "What reasoning guided my decision?"
  - "What risks did I weigh?"

*"What difference did my position, my level of influence, or my confidence make in what I finally decided to do?"*

*"What benefit or loss resulted from my decision?"*

3. After reviewing your experiences, look for common threads. What do these reminders or insights suggest to you about how others around you might experience fear, or trust, or vulnerability, or commitment?
4. Think about how these points might influence the way you go about exploring these same issues with others.

*Be willing to discuss the sensitive subjects connected to fear in the workplace.* When leaders show that they care about building trust and are open to talking about the reasons why people hesitate to speak up, many people are willing to participate. To get these conversations under way:

Strategy	What This Should Accomplish
Learn about workplace fears	Increased understanding of your personal experiences with fear Observations about leadership behaviors and their impact on others
Introduce the subject of fear in an informal way	Increased awareness of the issues without threatening others The issues of fear and trust become discussable and a part of normal workplace interactions
Enlist the support of other managers who report to you	Greater energy and a broader base of support for building trust and reducing fear More effective approaches to change due to greater input
Overcome denial	Increased recognition and support for addressing the negative impact of fear in the workplace

Grid 8.1. How to Acknowledge the Presence of Fear.

1. Express your interest in knowing what other people have experienced.
2. Ask thoughtful, open-ended questions that help to clarify what they are saying.
3. Be willing to share some of your own experiences.
4. Let people know why you want to reverse the patterns of fear and what you think needs to be done to help that change occur.
5. Be an open-minded listener when people share strong emotions or complex stories that are told from what you would see as a biased point of view.
6. When asked for your opinion, avoid making judgmental comments that might later be misinterpreted by others.
7. Encourage others to be less judgmental about past wrongs and more open to an honest exchange of views and caring feedback.

Discussions about sensitive experiences can be difficult. People may tell you things that you would rather not hear. Because of your leadership role, some may expect you to respond to their anger or cynicism. Others may want you to agree with their point of view, even if it runs contrary to your own. If the conversations get tough, remember that an important first step is doing exactly what you are doing—opening up the conversation and working to understand the situation. This lets others know that you are willing to hear them out and acknowledge the presence of fear. Your purpose in this moment is not to reach a point of resolution.

**Resist getting caught in the cycle of mistrust.** In conversations about workplace fears, you may encounter anger, cynicism, complaining, labeling, and apparent resistance to moving forward in what you see as a constructive way. At these moments:

1. Freeze your own negative assumptions about those who are speaking. Notice them as they come to mind and consciously bypass them in favor of a more objective view where you respond with such words as these:

*"It's obvious to me that you've got strong feelings about these experiences. Tell me what you've done in the past to try to get things on the right track."*

*"I can see that from your point of view, it must seem that no one in management cares about your ideas that have disappeared into the black hole. Let me tell you what I think we might do next, after this conversation—if you'll agree."*

*"If you could replay this scenario, how would you like to have had things happen? Is there anything we can do now to help you move forward and be more positive in your feelings?"*

2. To prepare yourself for such conversations, review Chapter Two, where we describe the cycle of mistrust.

**Seek feedback about your style and your performance.** Of all the things leaders can do to help them reverse the patterns of fear, asking for, understanding, and responding to feedback are among the most powerful. Throughout many of the suggestions we make in this and the remaining chapters, you will find encouragement to gather others' perspectives about the impact of both *what* you do and *how* you do it. As you work with issues related to fear and trust, you will discover opportunities to learn about the way others see you. Sometimes this may come in a subtle reference or casual observation. Or you may hear it more directly in a request for you to do something in a new way. Staying open and tuned in to these moments will make it easier for you to gain a greater understanding about how your leadership is perceived. In Chapter Ten, we address this vitally important aspect in some detail.

## Introduce the Subject of Fear in an Informal Way

Getting everybody into the pool usually requires someone to test the water first. Your role as a leader is one of encouragement, of saying to others, "Hey, the water's fine, let's get in." This does not mean that you must be a technical expert on either water quality or swimming. With workplace fears, an early goal is to get others to talk about them. To do so, begin by voicing your own concerns about fear and its effects. Model the level of openness about this topic that you would like to achieve with others. Do not feel you need to have all the answers. You may wish to include the following techniques.

**Focus initially on the fear of speaking up.** Here are some simple ways to do this:

1. Share a newspaper article about employee involvement or other workplace innovations as a catalyst for discussion.
2. Generate a conversation about the barriers companies face in getting people to identify needed improvements.
3. If it does not automatically surface, add the fear of repercussions to the list of barriers and ask people to describe their related experiences.

**Show them this book.** Sometimes a book can help to make subjects legitimate and therefore easier to discuss.

1. Share the definitions, some conclusions, or a particular quotation you find provocative from this book.
2. Ask people questions such as these:
  - "How might we apply these concepts here in our work group?"*
  - "What impact would they have on our work in general? Our relationships? Our customers? A particular current project?"*
  - "Are there any special steps we need to take in light of this discussion?"*
3. Listen and respond to points made in a light and easy way, not making too much of any one response, but noting the patterns and implications.

**Tell stories from your own experience, preferably stories from other organizations.** This will let people know that you will be able to empathize with them because of your own experiences.

1. To draw them out, say:
  - "I remember times when I wanted to say something, to offer what I thought was a better way. But I hesitated because I didn't want to create a big deal. I never felt good about it afterward."*
  - "I once worked for somebody who had the habit of talking down to employees. It sure was annoying, and it scared the heck out of people who didn't know him well."*
2. Ask if anybody else has had a similar experience.
3. Set a personal direction and ask for their help, by saying:

*"I want to avoid making others afraid to talk to me. I hope you will tell me if I ever come across that way."*

*"Please let me know if I do things that cause you to think I don't want to hear your ideas."*

**Turn awkward moments into opportunities for deeper levels of honest conversation.** If your introduction of the topic goes flat, it is possible that some of your own past behaviors are involved. There is usually something about most managers' conduct and performance that has been intimidating to others at some point in the past. Suppose, for example, that you mention a fear-causing behavior such as making secretive decisions and the room goes silent. People give each other meaningful glances but avoid eye contact with you. In the awkwardness of the moment, recognize that you have just stumbled across an important opportunity. To take advantage of it:

1. Make an observation to the group, such as
  - "Looks like I've stepped into something pretty important."*
  - "From the look of your reaction, I suspect we could use some conversation around this one."*
 People will probably laugh nervously after you make your observation.
2. Next, ask people to talk to you about why the room went silent. Tell them that this is exactly the kind of discussion that needs to take place before you can collectively move forward to reduce the amount of fear in the work environment.
3. Then be quiet and listen to what people have to say.

Suggestions such as these are informal methods that can be woven into day-to-day interactions. They get people thinking and let them know where you are coming from. Along the way you get a chance to practice the vocabulary of fear—words such as *scared*, *anxious*, *hesitant*, and *afraid*—in a confident, supportive tone that assures others that you are not implying criticism. Broaching the subject of fear informally also gives you a chance to monitor the responses you get in return. If people jump into the discussion freely, you are already miles ahead. If not, it could be simply that they have not thought about fear as a workplace issue. Keep up the informal comments and storytelling. Eventually, others will begin to add stories of their own.

## Enlist the Support of Other Managers Who Report to You

Midlevel managers and first-line supervisors often voice concerns about being caught in the middle. When the folks at the top get a new idea, these midlevel people are sometimes involved in the initial thinking and decision making. Frequently, they are not. Yet they are the individuals who are usually charged with implementing countless new programs and initiatives, many of which languish after a flurry of executive attention and the spending of much money. These requests come, of course, while they are also expected to maintain smooth daily operations. This double demand causes middle managers to become understandably skeptical about "another new management program."

If you supervise people who manage others, it is very important for you to actively engage them in the process of reducing fear and building trust. If you do not do this, hesitancy, skepticism, or a lack of cooperation on their part may limit the eventual effectiveness of your effort.

*Share your reasons for wanting to reduce fear and build trust.* When you sincerely and enthusiastically tell people why you want to make changes in the work culture, they will be more open to joining you in that effort. To build this support:

1. Individually or in a group, lay out the reasons behind your interest in creating a more trusting, collaborative work environment.
2. Describe the process you have gone through to come to this decision.
3. Share data that they may find convincing related to customer requirements, production rates, the cost of waste, and the results of employee opinion surveys.
4. Ask for their perspective on these issues and ask for their help. Get their assessment of how fear affects the whole organization.
5. Share with them your preliminary thinking about approaches to take and ask for their feedback on these ideas. Together, build a plan of action.

*Explore their concerns about your action plan.* Those who report to you need a chance to raise concerns about the changes you want to make. Some of these issues may be undiscussable. For example:

- How will operations continue at a full pace if managers are asked to pay special attention to initiatives in organizational culture?
- Where will the time come from to manage these initiatives?
- What new expectations will be placed on managers?
- Are these new expectations the latest "management fad," or will they be consistently supported and reinforced?
- What kind of support will managers be given to learn new ways of doing things?

It is important to create as much psychological safety as possible so that people will be honest with you about what they really think of your plans to reduce fear. Until their underlying concerns are on the table and you have had a chance to address them, you should expect people to have a divided response. If you have more than one level of managers and supervisors reporting to you:

1. Give those at the higher levels a chance to think through these issues for themselves before their direct reports are involved.
2. In any such discussions, remember that these managers and supervisors may simply try to tell you what they think you want to hear. After all, you are the boss. If you believe that this is the case, use an easy, low-key approach.

*Use a checklist of the possible symptoms and costs of fear.* A checklist can be a helpful way for many people to begin understanding how fear affects the workplace. The following list of possible "symptoms" of fear provides a good way to build awareness, particularly if you have encountered some elements of denial. Three fundamental questions should be asked for each item:

1. Is it happening here?
2. What might it have to do with fear, particularly the fear of speaking up?
3. What costs—tangible or intangible—are associated with each item for employees, managers, the organization, or the customers?

The possible symptoms include

- Lawsuits against the company
- Labor unrest, formation of unions, and hard bargaining; strikes
- A lack of suggestions for improvements and innovations
- The loss of customers who complain about poor service or products
- Turf battles over resources, assignments, and roles
- Us-versus-them talk
- Complaints after a meeting is over
- Unwillingness to take responsibility for mistakes; cover-ups
- An overly large number of personnel policies; an enforcement approach to rules; continuous arguments about the rules
- Many layers of approval for simple decisions
- Many sequences of checking for simple transactions
- "CYA" ("cover your ass") activities
- People behaving politically
- Negative feelings about the company; lack of pride or commitment
- An "I could care less" approach to the work
- Stressful work conditions or relationships
- Cynicism
- Bad decisions or indecision
- Grievances and employee complaints
- Resistance to performance appraisals
- A feeling by people that they get no feedback
- Expensive training programs aimed to "fix" employee or management performance
- Meetings where no one asks questions or no problems are solved
- Recurrent problems with absenteeism and tardiness
- Missed schedules
- Instances of unethical behavior
- Financial or budgetary problems

- Continual equal employment opportunity issues and harassment charges
- Resignation of high-quality performers and creative thinkers
- Eleventh-hour reports admitting that a project will not work or cannot be delivered on time
- A commitment to projects that people know are a waste of time and money
- A very active rumor mill
- Widespread dissatisfaction with promotions, assignments, and terminations
- Threatening behavior by supervisors, managers, or employees

Not every item on the list necessarily represents a sign that fear is alive and well in your workplace. Yet the list gives individuals something concrete against which to test their own experience. Discussing it can lead people to observe how easy it is to take fear and its costs for granted. As people share their perspectives, they may begin to see behavioral patterns in a new light, understanding the sometimes subtle way fear and mistrust influence daily activities.

You may find, especially at this early stage, that it is important to reassure people that you are not just looking for problems and things that are wrong. For example, it may be helpful to offer a list of what is going well along with the symptoms of fear so people know that their positive contributions are appreciated and are not being ignored.

## Overcome Denial

Denial is an instinctive retreat from something that is potentially threatening. It is a very natural response to a topic like fear in the workplace. Denial can often be detected by the different types of objections people raise when you tell them of your plans to do things differently. Grid 8.2 captures some of the patterns you may observe.

These variations of denial boil down to the feeling, "That's not us," or "That's not me." Usually objections like these are warning signals that the topic has been communicated in a threatening way that implies criticism, blame, or a negative intent. We learned this lesson the hard way, as the following story reveals.

all defensive. He just wanted to know. The customer relations supervisor turned to him and said with equal naturalness and candor, "Of course." "Really?" he asked. "Oh sure," she replied. "It's all over the place. I see it every day." "You do?" he asked. "I'd really be interested in hearing about what you are seeing."

They spent the next few minutes in an engaged, illuminating conversation. He had demonstrated perfectly, perhaps without really knowing it, a powerful step someone in his position might take to acknowledge fear's presence.

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## New Lessons and Reflections

### Thoughts on Organizational Culture

If people suggest that driving out fear and building trust is "not the real work of the organization," you might want to create some focused time to explore the questions: What is the real work of this organization? What is the real work of our work group? The view that tending an organization's culture is not real work can be the easy way out for people who are uncomfortable with emotions, relationships, and ambiguity in the work environment. In most cases it is an unintentional, yet unfortunate, put-down of some of the most difficult and important work faced by leaders today. It is important to address this opinion, because if this notion spreads to others, you will have a much harder time reducing fear and increasing trust.

Prior to these discussions, you might want to reread Chapter Seven, which references studies about companies that consistently demonstrate success over long periods of time. Additionally, think about the future directions of organizations and work (see Chapter Sixteen). In particular, you might want to read Arie de Geus's *The Living Company* (1997b) and Thomas Stewart's *Intellectual Capital* (1997). Each of these presents a very provocative view about real work, especially as we move into the next century.

In your discussions, it is important to ask the following questions: Once the real work is defined, how do we best accomplish that work? To what degree do fear-based habits (see Chapter Four) and assumptions (think about the cycle of mistrust) block our ability to do this work? Isn't the removal of these barriers part of the real work that needs to be done?

### Thoughts on Personal Leadership

Perhaps one of the most sensitive aspects of acknowledging fear's presence has to do with accepting that *all* of us have the potential to create fear and mistrust. While it may not feel good to know that you have not spoken up or have experienced fear yourself, often far more threatening is the idea that you may be exhibiting personal behaviors that erode trust.

The deputy manager of a complex, multimillion-dollar engineering project was frustrated because others did not always share their opinions candidly in his presence. However, after thinking over the matter, he decided that an old pattern of personal criticism and blame might be showing through in his behavior toward others. His ability to share this piece of self-knowledge with the professional managers with whom he worked signaled to them his willingness to learn and change. As he came to understand these reactions and their true impact on others, alternative behaviors, including a greater tolerance for listening to others' explanations without interruption, began to reveal themselves. While he still works on this problem "every day," he is respected for his personal insight into behaviors that many of his colleagues thought were unchangeable.

A common misconception among leaders is that personal disclosure is a weakness. As one executive commented, "They ultimately depend on me. It's better not to tell them about my flaws." But nondisclosure looks false, creates further tension and undiscussables, and ultimately fools no one.

2. Encourage people, however, to look for the "silent" organization, the opportunities that are lost because people hesitate to offer their ideas.
3. Informally weave these concepts, ideas, and questions into your interactions with most of the people you encounter.
4. More formally, at large or small staff meetings, ask structured discussion questions such as these, using a brainstorming technique:

*"What strengths do you see in our current operations?"*

*"What barriers keep you from being as successful as you would like to be?"*

*"Which of those barriers involve undiscussable issues? Fear of repercussions? A sense that things won't change?"*

*"If this were an organization where all people offered their ideas without hesitation, how would things be different? What kinds of things would we be doing? How would our customers be served differently?"*

**Apply the cycle of mistrust to better understand the patterns of fear.** As a catalyst to conversation, go over the cycle of mistrust in Chapter Two. This can help everyone to better understand how fear begins and is perpetuated in your organization. In one-on-one situations or small groups:

1. Apply the cycle of mistrust to a recent situation that people would easily characterize as negative or mistrustful. Walk through the model, identifying the negative assumptions supervisors make about employees and vice versa. If your situation did not involve mistrust between supervisors and employees, adapt the model as needed—for example, between two departments, between two individuals, between a customer and a supplier. Pose questions like the following ones:

*"What negative assumptions do you see going on in this situation?"*

*"What kinds of self-protective behavior do the negative assumptions inspire on both sides?"*

*"Generally speaking, what's the gap between our intended behavior and how it is perceived by others?"*

*"What can we do to turn a cycle like this around?"*

2. Save your perspectives until others have had a chance to share their point of view. Describe how you feel about things. Let people know that you get frustrated and are sometimes tense or anxious.
3. Make sure the tone in your voice is open and interested, rather than interrogative. Your questions and manner should convey genuine interest and a desire for a mutual exchange of ideas.

**Stay positively focused and respectful of others if the denial continues.** These steps will not address all types of denial. Some individuals may want "proof" of fear's negative impact and may voice that desire in an aggressive way. Others may be convinced that fear is too big or too entrenched in organizations to be turned around. Their cynicism may be discouraging and can seem to be an unreasonable barrier to your desires to create a different kind of work environment. In these cases:

1. Accept the denial and doubts of others as interesting and legitimate counterpoints to your own thinking.
2. Ask people to keep those questions handy and to watch for evidence that answers their concerns.
3. Work past your sense of disappointment about the denial as you implement other strategies that will help to illuminate the presence of fear and its negative impact in the workplace.

Acknowledging the presence of fear requires a willingness to be open and stay open as you initiate all sorts of discussions with others. In the give-and-take of the conversations that unfold, you will encounter a challenging mix of opinions, experiences, data, and emotions. Some of these conversations may be very frustrating, particularly when denial is in full bloom. Over time, however, more and more people will appreciate and respond to your consistent interest in understanding and surfacing the patterns of fear in the work environment.

To illustrate this point, we would like to return to the story we told earlier about our poorly received presentation. During the evening, we saw the corporation's second-highest officer do a simple thing. He turned to the person next to him at the dinner table, a customer relations supervisor many layers lower in the organization, and asked the question, "What do you think? Is there fear in this organization?" His tone was very natural and sincere. He was not at

<i>When People</i>	<i>You May Hear</i>
Don't see fear as part of their work environment or as applying to their organization and relationships	"I just don't see how this fear issue applies around here. It might be true for other people or someplace else, but I don't see how it fits the operations division."
Do see fear, but as a human relations issue unrelated to the "real" work of the organization	"I don't see why we should spend more time talking about this stuff. I just want to do my job."
Are personally very confident and consider fear a sign of immaturity, inexperience, or personal weakness	"It's not my problem if other people don't speak up. If people are too mealymouthed or insecure to talk about what's bothering them, then maybe they haven't got a point."
Think of fear as an inevitable part of organizations	"Sure there's fear around here, and you're never going to get rid of it, either."
Don't see fear as having much of an impact on quality or productivity or may think it increases them	"Frankly, a little fear isn't such a bad thing to keep people on their toes."
Are concerned that they will have to make personal changes if this topic is "taken too far"	"This training is all well and good, but it doesn't apply to the real world."

Grid 8.2. Expressions of Denial.



## *Presentation to the Management Team*

During part of our research effort, we made a presentation to the management team of one of the participating companies. The team was made up of about 175 executives, managers, and supervisors and included the chairman of the board, the vice chairman, and the CEO. Earlier in the day, we had been quite successful in reporting to a small group of top officers a summary of responses from a sample of previously interviewed company employees. We reported how the sample group's answers to the questions about undiscussables, reasons for not speaking up, and the impact of fear compared with results from our research effort as a whole.

At the evening presentation for the larger group of managers, we followed a nearly identical format. We included an opportunity for the managers, working in small groups, to briefly identify what they believed were the company's undiscussables. In a gratifying way, the undiscussables surfaced by these small groups seemed to match the data we were about to report from the interviewed employees. Once those sample data had been presented by us and compared to the broader research findings, we turned to the whole group and asked the leading question: "Does this mirror your experience with this company? Do these data points ring true?" Loud shouts of "No way!" echoed across the room. We were shocked and a bit confused. "How come?" we asked the managers. Suddenly, we found ourselves answering lots of questions about how the sample of employees had been chosen, whether it reflected a vertical slice of the organization (it did), and whether it included enough people. We had a classic "That's not us" response on our hands. We forged ahead with the presentation, feeling as if we had endured a sufficient gash in our credibility for one day.

Ultimately the evening was saved by two events. First, the HR director pointed out before our talk finished that we had omitted one vital piece of information used at the earlier presentation to the officers. We had reported to the officers, but not the managers, that many of the employees interviewed had commented on how much they liked working at the company. The second event was the commentary made by the CEO at the end of the presentation. He reminded his team that the glass at their company was more than half full. He then told them of his own experiences in getting personal feedback and the need to listen to the news, good or bad, about management conduct and performance.

This was a sharp lesson for us about flooding people with data that could be heard as critical of their organization or their own performance. The HR director's reminder and the CEO's "more than half full" line go right to the core of the issue of denial. No matter how bad things might be, people want to feel good about themselves and their circumstances.

To avoid being on the receiving end of defensive reactions like those we experienced, focus on creating an understanding of the need for change. Here are two very effective methods.

***Place the topic of fear in context.*** In most organizations, fear is part of the background, not the foreground. To help people feel more comfortable exploring some of this neglected terrain:

1. Remind people of the many things that are already going right and celebrate these things.