

BEYOND THE REASSURING UPDATE

When the Steering Committee Goes Quiet: A Note on Stakeholder Management in a Climate of Fear

Why the instinct to reassure is exactly wrong when everyone is afraid — an observation from mid-2009



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The meeting that stopped asking questions

Something worth noting is happening in programme steering committees this summer, and it is easy to mistake for good news. The meetings have gone calm. The hard questions that used to fill the second half of the agenda — why has this slipped, what is the contingency, who owns that risk — have thinned out. Attendance is patchier; senior sponsors send deputies. The status reports come back a reassuring shade of amber. A programme director, exhausted from a year of firefighting, could be forgiven for reading this quiet as a sign that things have finally steadied.

It is nothing of the sort. After two or three rounds of redundancies, the people around that table are frightened, and frightened people do not interrogate. They have watched colleagues leave, they are unsure of their own footing, and they have learned the survivor's lesson of a bad year: do not be the person associated with a problem. So they stop asking about problems. The committee has not grown confident. It has grown quiet in the specific way that a room grows quiet when everyone has decided that raising their hand is a risk. And a governance body that has stopped asking hard questions is not a governance body at all — it is an audience.

Fear inverts the rules of communication

Here is the single point worth making, because most stakeholder-management instinct is built for ordinary times and quietly fails in this one. In a normal climate, a leader manages upward anxiety by containing it — absorbing the day-to-day noise, projecting steadiness, not troubling the sponsors with every wobble. The protective instinct is to reassure: shield the stakeholders from the churn, tell them it is under control, bring them the bad news only once you also have the fix. In peacetime this is good practice. In a climate of fear it is close to the worst thing a leader can do.

Fear changes the physics. A frightened stakeholder does not hear a reassuring update as reassurance; they hear it as management, and they assume they are being managed because the truth is worse than they are being told. The very smoothness that would have calmed them a year ago now reads as a warning. And silence is read most darkly of all.

Silence, in a frightened organisation, is never heard as calm; it is heard as catastrophe being withheld. In a good year no news is good news. In a bad one, no news is the most frightening news there is.

The protective instinct, in other words, produces the opposite of its intent. Withhold the bad news until you have the fix, and the gap between reports fills not with patience but with worst-case invention. Reassure without substance, and you spend the one thing you will desperately need when there is genuinely bad news to deliver: the stakeholder's belief that when you say it is fine, it is fine. Credibility is the working capital of crisis communication, and false reassurance is how a leader goes bankrupt slowly and then all at once.

What the moment actually asks for

The correction is not to flood the room with alarm — fear feeds on drama as readily as on silence. It is narrower and harder: to keep telling an unfrightened truth to a frightened audience, and to keep the channel open at exactly the moment the instinct is to close it.

- Report on a fixed rhythm, and never go dark. In a climate of fear the interval between updates is itself a message. A predictable, unremarkable cadence — kept even when there is nothing new to say, especially when there is nothing new to say — starves the worst-case imagination of the silence it needs.
- Name the bad news before you have the fix. The instinct to wait until you can pair a problem with a solution is a peacetime luxury. Now, the unaccompanied problem, stated plainly, buys more trust than the polished reassurance that arrives too late to be believed.
- Treat the quiet committee as a red flag, not a reprieve. When the questions stop, the risks have not gone; they have gone unspoken, which is worse. Draw them out deliberately — put the awkward question on the table yourself — rather than enjoying the silence.
- Say plainly what you do not know. I don't know yet, and here is when I will holds a frightened stakeholder far better than a confident answer that later proves hollow. Admitted uncertainty is survivable; discovered spin is not.

None of this is complicated, and in ordinary times none of it would be worth writing down. What makes it worth noting now is that the pressure of a frightening year pushes every leader toward the reassuring, the smooth, and the silent — toward exactly the reflexes that a frightened audience reads backwards. The programmes that hold their stakeholders through the rest of this downturn will not be the ones that sounded the most in control. They will be the ones that stayed legible — that kept talking, kept telling the truth, and understood that in a climate of fear the quiet meeting is not the calm before recovery but the sound of a governance body quietly checking out.