

Career Path: Do You Want to Hear the Truth?

Career Development



Not long ago, I explored with you the question of Who Can Freely Speak the Truth? Today, we tackle what may be a tougher question: Do you want to *hear* the truth? Although this one may make you uncomfortable at times, stay with me to the end and I bet you'll feel better.

You will decide for yourself what you think. Let me lay down a few pieces of evidence that suggest to me we often just don't want to hear the truth:

- The formula for maintaining your weight is simple and widely-known: Eat less and exercise. Yet diet books remain a significant chunk of total book sales, and new diets are introduced each year.
- The secret to happy relationships is no secret: Pay attention to the people closest to you, communicate well by listening more than you talk, and express your emotions in terms of how you feel and not what the other person said or did. Yet the offices of psychiatrists and marriage counselors are filled with angry couples and sad individuals.
- The path to advancing your career is open to all: Do a good job in your current job before you reach for the next, focus on continuous improvement in all areas of your life, and volunteer often while remaining open to opportunities. Yet of the 10 percent or so of the workforce that turns over every year, many are people frustrated that their aspirations have been thwarted. How many more remain within their companies but suffer from the same discontent?



I could go on because there are many more examples to choose from. I picked topics that we usually think of as anything but simple to demonstrate that *it is we humans that make topics complicated*. Why? I'm not sure, but perhaps it is because we really would prefer an easier answer.

> "I can't lose weight because of my genes, or hormones, or because corporations make unhealthy food."

All true, but these are factors conveniently out of your control.

> "I am unlucky in love. Perhaps it's because my parents moved too often, and I have had to change schools once too many times. If only I had the right clothes, or haircut, or social media presence. It could be because my company expects me to work evenings and weekends – I have no life outside work!"

All true, but also apparently outside your control.

> "I have not progressed my career, even though other, less-qualified, people are promoted ahead of me. Management is biased, and the company is not as committed to diversity as they pretend. I have to work twice as hard to get the same chances as others, and I'm tired of it!"

True, true, true.

Focus on what we can control

Now, I don't want to make you feel bad by suggesting that what happens to you is your fault. Many things that happen to us are completely outside our control. Stoic advice is for us to focus on what we *can* control. This starts with how we feel about what happens to us. The Stoic solution is simplicity itself but because it requires self-knowledge and self-discipline, the great majority ignore it and seek salvation in external things.

Because you are here with me reading this, I am confident you are interested in expanding your self-knowledge. As such, let's explore the question of whether we want to hear the truth from another angle.

Notwithstanding how useful it can be to learn something about ourselves, how do we typically respond when someone offers us "constructive criticism" in the workplace or otherwise? Do we listen carefully and thank them for taking the time to give us feedback? Do we thoughtfully consider both the credibility of the person giving us advice and the objective validity of their advice?



Truth can be painful

If you're anything like me, that is not your instinctive response. I have a raging monster inside me, tethered on the flimsiest of leashes. When someone offers me "feedback," I know to expect the monster to feel a flood of emotions. These range from shame, to fear, to outrage. Through practice, I've learned to take note of these feelings (I cannot suppress them, and don't bother trying), while trying to listen carefully. I am not yet gracious enough to thank the person at that moment for the gift of their observations, but at least I no longer try to counter their unprovoked attack by vigorously defending my virtue or letting the monster out to go on the offensive for me.

I think we don't want to hear the truth because the truth is often painful. We are none of us perfect, except perhaps in our mother's and grandmother's eyes. Although we are blind to many of our imperfections, our colleagues' vision is perfect when identifying our flaws. Others see what we cannot. In every other work setting, we acknowledge gaps and weaknesses and take steps to compensate. But when it comes to hearing truths about ourselves, we shy away.

Is it possible to overcome the resistance to hearing the truth about ourselves? I believe so. I try now to ask myself two questions when confronted with feedback. "Does this feedback come from a person I trust?" If so, why wouldn't I listen to them now? And regardless of the source: "Is it possible that what this person is saying is true?" If so, should I not take it into consideration and act accordingly?

In this way, we can apply our continuous improvement principles based on what is *actually* true. And because so few people are willing to undertake this exercise, you will find doing so is something like a superpower.

Be well.

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