

Building Higher Trust 71 Open Door Caveats

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



If you are like most professionals, your company has an “open door” policy. The stated rule is that if an employee feels something is not right, he or she has an open door to discuss the problem with the supervisor. If the supervisor cannot resolve the issue, then the employee has an open door to go higher in the chain or to HR for resolution.

This process is one of the most commonly employed HR strategies to ensure individuals do not feel trapped under an ogre of a supervisor with no way to communicate their frustration. Open door will be effective if there is high trust between the employee and supervisor. If there is not, then the employee must escalate the issue to a higher level, and that is where the trouble starts.

Unfortunately, the strategy is often dysfunctional, and it can actually do more harm than good. Let’s put the “open door” policy under the microscope and see what makes it dangerous, then suggest an antidote that can help.

The Open Door Policy sounds so inherently right, few employees question it until they are embroiled in a problem and have to try to obtain the intended benefits. It reminds me of an insurance policy. You assume protection until you have a claim, then you find out what the fine print was all about.

Likewise, many managers hide behind the open door as a kind of cure-all for organizational low trust. Both symptoms mask an underlying malaise that must be rooted out and destroyed. On the surface, the open door leads to greater transparency and fairness, but in the real world, there are several reasons it rarely works that way.

- 1. The “Open Door” policy can be a sham** – If an employee wants to use the open door policy it is usually because of some kind of rift with his or her immediate supervisor. There is something bad going on according to the

employee's interpretation, and the supervisor is unwilling or incapable of dealing with the situation.

During these times, trust between the individual and level-one supervision is at an all-time low. Since talking it out with level one will only bring additional grief, the employee uses the open door and tries to clear the air by talking to level two.

The level-two manager is not fully familiar with the issue, so the only recourse is to listen politely to the employee and then have a chat with the level-one supervisor. In the process, the level-one supervisor immediately becomes aware that he or she has been "blown in" to the boss.

Regardless of how professional both leaders are, this series of discussions usually results in a further reduction of trust between the three levels and the individuals involved. Since trust was compromised to begin with, the poor employee is now under an even more ominous cloud.

2. **The "Open Door" can lead to games** – I recall a discussion with my boss. He wanted to use the open door policy correctly and not jeopardize the employee, who was working for me. At the time, I had nearly 2,000 people working in my organization.

My boss told me one of my employees had complained that I was not treating the person fairly (he was careful to keep the discussion gender-neutral to make it harder for me to guess who might have the issue).

I had taken over a new area, and the trust in me was under development. My boss would not tell me who the individual was, or the specific area involved. He would only tell me that there was someone out there that did not trust me to treat him or her fairly.

He would not share the specific area of concern nor give me enough data to have a clue for how to fix it. This discussion served to put me on notice, but it caused me to start second guessing every interface or action attempting to uncover the problem.

In the end, I never did figure out who the person was or what the issue was. For months I went around like Sherlock Holmes trying to figure out what incorrect signals this one individual had been getting. Meanwhile, the rest of the population, who were not concerned with my fairness, thought I was acting a little weird.

3. **"Open Door" has a bad reputation on the shop floor** - In many organizations, employees are fully aware that the open door policy is something that makes management feel good and looks good in the employee handbook, but it is a poor vehicle to use if there is an actual issue on the shop floor.

If the symptom leading to the need for an open door conversation is low trust, then how can escalating the issue to the next higher level be helpful? There are also folk tales of the poor soul who got so upset with a situation that he actually did use the open door and lived to regret it every day thereafter until he finally quit the organization.

Far better to suffer the current injustice than call in the big guns and ensure more pain.

4. **“Open Door” failures lead to Ombudsmen** – When the open door gets a reputation for causing additional grief and not resolving problems, organizations often resort to a third party grievance resolution mechanism called an Ombudsman.

Again, from an HR or legal perspective, this practice **seems** reasonable and fair. It really can resolve some issues, but it is also fraught with cloak and dagger nonsense that usually further undermines trust as the clueless Ombudsman seeks to understand what is really going on without upsetting people.

Meanwhile, the employee is on tenterhooks hoping the desperate action to call in a third party will not backfire. Once again, since the root cause of the problem can be traced to a lack of trust, the Ombudsman approach is at best a last resort effort to save utter collapse.

5. **What if the level-two manager is a jerk too?** – If an employee has a problem with the integrity of the level-one supervisor, then the level-two supervisor is often in question as well.

From a shop floor perspective, all management is painted with the same brush. Actually, there are situations where there is a bad apple in the middle and employees really do trust the second level more than the first level.

More often, all management is suspect if there are weak links. After all, if the big boss tolerates a bully in the supervisory ranks, then that manager is not doing his or her job either. Why would employees feel high trust for that person? They more likely picture the big boss as a well-intended but clueless manager who has no idea how miserable things are two levels below.

These are five very real symptoms of problems with the open door policy. I am not saying it is a bad thing to have or that it never works. What I am suggesting is that there is a better way.

The Antidote

What if we taught managers at all levels to reinforce candor? Employees would learn that is not a career-threatening opportunity to bring an issue to the immediate boss. In fact, when they bring up scary stuff or perceived inequities, they are rewarded in some way. The reward would be regardless of the level.

It would mean that the need for escalation would be significantly reduced in the first place, and for those few situations where a higher level discussion would be useful, then the employee is still reinforced.

Imagine the poor Ombudsman with less work than the Maytag Repairman. Imagine an entire workforce concentrating on the mission and vision of the organization instead of constantly negotiating their way through minefields of bureaucratic protectionism. Imagine running an organization based on trust instead of fear. It is possible if we simply teach leaders to reinforce candor.

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