

The Queen Of Candour

Shari Harley has spent the last fifteen years developing talent in Fortune 50 companies, and in this exclusive interview, she tells us how to say just about anything to anyone!

■ Conversation, Trust and Communication

GROWING up attending personal development workshops made for a slightly unusual upbringing. However, Ms. Shari Harley, Principal of The Harley Group says that these sessions helped her understand the career path she wanted to take. Ms. Harley followed her heart and is now a leadership and organisational development expert. In this exclusive interview with *The Human Factor*, she talks about how each of us is responsible for the success of our own career.

Q. You are often called ‘The Queen of Candour’ for your intensive work on conversation and communication. What does that feel like?

A. I really believe that people can say anything to anyone when trust is present. Most of us just do not do the work early in our relationships to develop that trust and gain the permission to say whatever we need to say. As a result, saying hard things remains hard. I start every relationship by setting the expectation that each person not only has the right, but is expected to say whatever they need to say. I am very open to feedback. I learned early on in my career that people have a tendency to talk about us, not to us. And if I do not know how I am perceived, I cannot manage my career. I must know what people are thinking and saying about me. Having that knowledge allows me to adjust my behaviour. Each of us is responsible for the success of our own career. No one else. Not a manager or leader.

Q. What was it that motivated you to get into this field?

A. Growing up, my parents sent my brother and me to seminars for children focused on personal responsibility and communication skills. While other kids talked about sports, my brother and I talked about how we were responsible for everything that happened to us. It made for a slightly unusual upbringing.

“I PERIODICALLY ASK MY CLIENTS AND COLLEAGUES: WHAT IS MY DEPARTMENT BEST KNOWN FOR AND NOT KNOWN FOR, WHAT IS THE BEST THING ABOUT OUR SERVICE AND WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU WISH WAS DIFFERENT, TELL ME ABOUT A TIME WHEN WE LET YOU DOWN.”

At the age of 12, I knew that when I grew up I wanted to lead seminars helping other people develop good communication and relationship skills. I wanted to major in training and development in college, but there was no training major at the time. Instead I majored in Psychology. When I graduated, I went to work for Dale Carnegie Training. I wanted to work for myself, even back then, but knew I did not have the experience or credibility. In preparation I got a Masters degree and spent 15 years leading leadership development training, succession planning and operations units for corporations. Two years ago, I finally decided I was ready to go out on my own.

Q. What is the key to building powerful relationships?

A. I think the reason most of us have difficulty saying hard things is that we do not have the permission to do so. If we started every relationship – personal and professional – by agreeing, “We will talk about what comes up in our relationship. If we do anything that frustrates or violates each other’s expectations, makes the other person happy or impacts our reputation, we will tell each other,” when something difficult happens, we are more likely to talk about it.

Human beings are wired to keep themselves safe, and as a result we avoid conflict. We do not tell people what we want, instead we expect them to approach work and relationships the way we do. When they do not, we are frustrated but do not feel we can say anything for fear of damaging the relationship. If we would just agree, early in every relationship, to speak up and say whatever there is to say, saying hard things would not be so hard.

Q. How can we remove communication barriers between managers and their employees?

A. I tell all the managers I work with to get to know their employees on a personal level early in the working relationship. People want to work for human beings. When employees know their managers

on a human level, and vice versa, they work better together.

At the beginning of a relationship, take new employees out to lunch. Spend a little time getting to know employees and sharing about yourself. What do you like to do in your free time? Where did you go to school? How long have you been at the company? Employees are curious about their managers. Managers should share this information and ask their employees to reciprocate.

After I have a basic get-to-know-you meeting, I tell employees this. And I use



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these precise words every time: “As your manager, my job is to help you get where you want to go, whether that is here within the company or elsewhere. As a result, I am going to ask for your permission to let you know anything I see you do or say that either contributes to where you want to go or gets in the way of that goal. Is that okay with you?”

Managers do not need permission to give employees feedback. The title and direct authority gives managers that right, and employees know it. But leaders get something for asking. As Stephen Covey would say, you are depositing into the emotional bank account.

You start to build trust, a little at a time, because while trust is broken in an instant, it is built over time. So from the first day you interact with your employees – starting during the hiring process – you are building trust. Because all long lasting relationships are built on trust, you are laying the foundation for a loyal, committed and long-term workforce.

I then give employees a list of questions I began writing 10 years ago and continue adding to even today. I tell the employees, “I want us to get to know each other and have a great working relationship. We are going to have our first one-on-one meeting in a week. At that meeting I want you to feel free to ask me any questions on this list and I will do the same.”

Some of the questions on the list are: describe the best/worst boss you ever had, what did s/he do that made him/her the best/worst boss, what are three things that would keep you at this organisation, what would make you leave, how do you like to receive recognition for a job well done, how will I know when you are frustrated, why did you take this job, what are you hoping this job will provide, what are your concerns, what do you want to know about me, and what else would you like me to know about you. The questions were designed to help you better understand the people you work with and vice versa. Often, people try to guess what others are expecting from their working relationships. Rather than guessing, making ‘mistakes,’ and then having to rebuild trust, why not ask in advance?

These questions are not intended to be a script. Use the questions that you like. You can give these questions to people as preparation before you meet, or them for your own preparation. Others rarely find these questions intrusive. Instead, most people are impressed that you asked. You can use these questions any time during a working relationship.

Q. What is the secret to saying anything to anyone?

A. Having permission. I cannot stress that enough. Saying things well and in

an appropriate setting helps, but it never takes the place of having a trusting relationship in which you have agreed to say whatever there is to say. Using the right words and a nice tone will never be as powerful as setting the expectation. And after you have set those expectations, here are some techniques to be able to say anything to anyone: expect others to become defensive, it is how human beings are wired; talk about difficult things when you are not upset; give feedback privately; be timely, give feedback within a week of an event occurring; if you do not have an example, you are not ready to give feedback; talk with people, do not send an email or voicemail; prepare, make notes of what you want to say and bring the notes to the conversation; give small amounts of feedback at a time; offer an alternative, if people knew of another way to do something, they would do it that way; and, give positive and negative feedback.

Q. Tell us about your consulting experiences with organisations.

A. I have worked with several organisations and my observations are always the same. All over the world, people are people. And people make up organisations. As a result, every organisation in the world that has more than two people has drama, gossip, expectations and disappointments. While the culture is different in each organisation, many of the rules remain the same: set expectations, tell the truth, give more information than you need to, when you make a mistake tell the truth about it and attempt to fix it, ask for others' opinions, and if you are not going to take someone's idea, tell them why.

Q. When did you face the toughest time of your career?

A. I was working in the World Trade Centre on September 11th 2001, but I happened to be out of town that day.

As a result, I was asked to lead the emotional disaster recovery efforts for the company. I never could have done this work had I been in NY on September 11th. I would have been too close to the situation and too affected by it myself. Being out of town allowed me a bit of distance and I was able to support our employees, calling each employee at home and coordinating counselling for months to come. For years I felt guilty for not being in NY on that day and wondered why I was not. It took me awhile to appreciate that I was much more useful to my colleagues and organisation having not been in NY on that horrible day than if I had been with them.

Q. What, in your opinion, are the upcoming trends in HR?

A. With the tightening economy, employers are not going to be able to encourage people financially the way they have in the past. Companies and managers are going to have to find creative and low cost ways to make employees feel important. I am a proponent of leveraging the power of the relationship. Be a place people want to work at and a person employees want to work for. Be different by demonstrating how much you care about your employees. Ask questions and listen to the answers.

Coach employees. Provide employees with opportunities to try new things and stretch themselves. None of these activities cost money but can go a long way in keeping employees engaged without any real cost.

Q. What is the most critical people management advice you would like to share?

A. Do not be a Corn Flake Manager. Cornflakes are breakfast cereal that taste good but do not have a lot of nutrients. Feedback that is rich in detail and information is like food and nutrition to employees. And employees need that food to thrive.

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Some Quick Ones!

The best advice you got?

My first mentor who I met just after I graduated from college encouraged me to take the job at Dale Carnegie Training I had been offered but was afraid to accept. I was afraid I would fail. He said to me, "Where did you get the idea that you need to succeed at everything you did? Did your mother teach you that? It is okay to fail." I took the job and that advice has served me well throughout my career.

How do you spend your free time?

I love to travel internationally more than anything. I love all things new and different. My grandparents were European and I grew up travelling. And if I can do it on a sailboat, that is perfect! I love to be outside and love the water, forests and basically anything outdoors.

Were you ever worried about saying the wrong thing?

I am always worried about saying the wrong thing. I teach people how to be more candid and it is a difficult skill for me as well. I am always wondering how I could have said something differently and if I say too much or damage a relationship. People think that because I am so direct, speaking candidly is easy for me. I worry just as much about hurting others' feelings and saying the wrong thing as everyone else.

If you were not in this job...?

I would be running an art gallery, importing handmade jewellery, pottery, and glass in the USA and selling it in a lovely gift shop. I love art and find myself looking for it in my free time. That is my next career.

Did you like coming to India?

I loved India and it is nothing like what I expected. I suppose I did not really know what to expect. It is a fascinating country. It is diverse and rich with history, tradition and art. The people are kind. The clothing is vibrant! Our clothing in the USA is boring. I loved the textiles in India. India is the most interesting place I have ever been and I am thrilled to be coming back in May.