

THE **4** LEVELS of GETTING THE UNSAID SAID *AND HOW TO RISE TO THE TOP*

BY STEVEN GAFFNEY



When it comes to successful business relationships, everyone knows communication is key. Even so, most organizations fail to focus on the right kind. Honest communication is crucial to building strong, healthy relationships in business—but it’s also increasingly rare.

The evidence is striking: 80% of all work problems can be traced to a lack of open, honest communication. When employees, colleagues, and executives don’t say what’s on their minds, the entire company suffers. How can managers help their teams succeed if employees never share their top challenges? How can

CEOs and executives lead effectively if no one gives them honest feedback?

After all, you can’t fix a problem that nobody tells you about—and you can’t use an idea that nobody shares with you.

The solution to this widespread problem is to “get the unsaid said” by encouraging open, honest communication throughout the organization. While this concept might seem simple, it’s notoriously difficult to implement in day-to-day business life. That’s where the 4 levels of getting the unsaid said—shutdown, reactive, proactive, and foreshadowing—can help dramatically.

Read on to learn exactly how.

WELLS FARGO AND THE DANGERS OF BAD COMMUNICATION

The 4 Levels of Getting the Unsaid Said

Getting the unsaid said exists on a sliding scale: Some organizations are better at it than others, and there's always room to improve. Once organizations can identify the different levels of getting the unsaid said, they can gauge their current approach—and start to move up to the next level.

Level 1: Shutdown—No communication

It's no surprise that being "shutdown" is at the bottom of the communication totem pole. At this level, people don't make any attempt to communicate honestly. They don't share their thoughts, even when asked, and they resist engaging in conversations that might require their opinion.

It's important to note that people are actually "saying something" by choosing to be silent at the shutdown level. The message? "I don't feel comfortable enough to share my thoughts in this environment, and don't see any potential benefit to sticking my neck out by voicing my concerns—only potential backlash." From here, there's nowhere to go but up. The first stop is reactive honesty.

Level 2: Reactive Honesty—Ask and you will receive

Reactive honesty is the most basic level of getting the unsaid said, and it's where the majority of organizations find themselves. At the reactive level, people don't share their problems unless they're specifically asked to. This makes it common for business problems to spin out of control before anyone tells the person in charge. At that point, a manager might ask, "Why didn't anyone tell me?!" and employees will likely respond, "You never asked us and we didn't know if it was any of our business."

When people are reactively honest, they don't share ideas without being asked, either. This hinders innovation at the organization, preventing the free exchange of ideas to improve the work environment. Companies that practice reactive honesty are in a true danger zone—not much better than the "shutdown" phase of communication. Why? Because problems aren't openly discussed, and ideas aren't freely shared, unless the right questions happen to be asked of the right people.

For those reasons, staying in the reactive honesty space will quickly become costly for any organization. Check out the accompanying sidebar about Wells Fargo for a powerful example of how reactive honesty can wreak havoc at even the largest, strongest organizations.

Level 3: Proactive Honesty—Share without asking

The next step up is proactive honesty, where people are proactive about communicating honestly with colleagues, managers, and executives alike. If your organization practices proactive honesty, people will share their opinions and ideas freely, without prompting. They'll also proactively discuss any problems they might be facing, before major issues arise.

Proactive honesty is clearly better than reactive honesty—but it's still not good enough to thrive in the modern work world. If organizations want to stay competitive in today's fast-paced, highly competitive environment, they need to do better than merely sharing problems and ideas without being prompted. They need to practice foreshadowing honesty.

In 2016, Wells Fargo was fined \$185 million to settle charges of illegal banking practices. That September, the bank's stock plummeted to a 31-month low, following revelations that its employees had fraudulently created as many as 2 million fake bank and credit card accounts in a widespread cross-selling scheme. 5,300 workers were fired.

Once the biggest bank in the United States—and one that weathered the 2008 recession far better than its peers—Wells Fargo suddenly faced an investigation by the Department of Justice, two Congressional hearings, lawsuits filed by angry customers, and even a federal class-action lawsuit brought by former Wells Fargo employees who claimed they were wrongfully fired. All this, in addition to \$185 million in fines.

So what does Wells Fargo's costly stumble have to do with getting the unsaid said? From my perspective, everything.

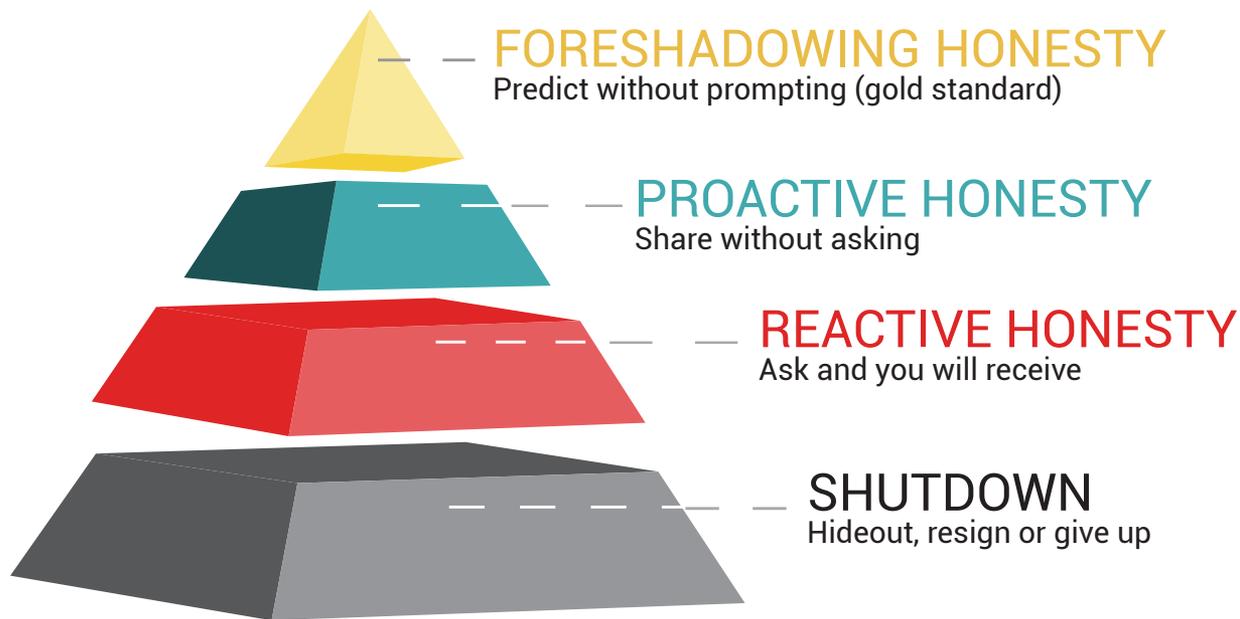
Most people look at the Wells Fargo debacle from a moral perspective, citing the blatantly unethical sales techniques that were incentivized throughout the organization for years. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, the bank's former CEO, John G. Stumpf, even admitted that the company's sales quotas directly incentivized employees to engage in fraudulent behavior. Stumpf was later forced into early retirement due to the scandal.

But the true cause of Wells Fargo's humiliating mistake wasn't simply a lack of ethics. It was also a lack of getting the unsaid said. From what we know about the scheme, it seems that the bank's company culture could have encouraged silence, penalized employees who voiced their concerns, and rewarded those who kept their mouths shut. Nearly a half dozen Wells Fargo employees claim they were fired for calling the bank's ethics hotline to report unethical behavior. One such employee, a manager who lost his job after reporting suspected fraud to his superiors, recently won \$5.4 million from the bank under whistle-blower protection laws.

How does a massive, otherwise well-run bank end up in such a seemingly predictable mess?

Blaming the Wells Fargo scandal on a lack of ethics ignores the evidence that many employees and managers tried to stop the unethical behavior. The company's culture likely silenced the voices of "proactively honest" workers, who took it upon themselves to say something. This discouraged other workers from raising the alarm—and further entrenched the unethical sales practices. As a result, most people at Wells Fargo were understandably practicing reactive honesty—only voicing their concerns when asked—while others were completely shut down, afraid of the repercussions of ever speaking up.

This story proves that even the strongest, biggest corporations will stumble mightily without the right communication strategy in place. That's why it's so important to understand the 4 levels of getting the unsaid said, and know exactly where your business stands.



Level 4: Foreshadowing Honesty— Predict without prompting (gold standard)

This is the “gold standard” of getting the unsaid said. In addition to sharing ideas and problems on a proactive basis, foreshadowing honesty also includes predicting future potential problems and opportunities. At this level, people openly discuss problems that might occur down the road. They also constantly think ahead, sharing ideas that might help in the future.

With foreshadowing honesty, people communicate both proactively and predictively about key areas of the business. It’s a recipe for success that builds robust relationships founded on openness and trust.

Foreshadowing honesty can dramatically transform internal relationships at organizations. But companies shouldn’t stop there: Foreshadowing honesty is a powerful force for improving external relationships, too.

How does your own organization interact with customers—and how do your customers interact with you? If foreshadowing honesty isn’t part of the answer, then your business is falling severely short of its growth potential.

How Foreshadowing Honesty Can Grow Your Business

Foreshadowing honesty is one of the most effective—yet underutilized—ways to interact with both existing and potential customers. It doesn’t cost you anything, but it will strengthen your customer relationships and grow your business. When organizations practice foreshadowing honesty with customers—and when customers practice it, too—the results are immediate.

Using Foreshadowing Honesty with Existing Customers

Think about it this way: If an organization is reactively honest, it doesn’t give customers what they need or tell them about problems until they specifically ask. If an organization is proactively honest, it proactively tells customers what they need, and

is up front about existing problems. But an organization that practices foreshadowing honesty takes this relationship to the next level by predicting what the customer might want in the future, and pointing out potential problems and opportunities down the road.

This constant focus on the future is what thought leadership is all about.

Using Foreshadowing Honesty with Potential Customers

When organizations use this model to interact with potential customers, these key relationships are continuously improving and lead to more business. Even if there’s nothing currently wrong with a prospect relationship, foreshadowing honesty enables organizations to get ahead of potential problems—and create future opportunities that otherwise wouldn’t exist. Instead of waiting for potential customers to say what they want, these companies let them know, in advance, what they should ask for.

Apple is the prime example of this model at work. The tech giant consistently creates new products that nobody ever asked for. From the iPad to the iPhone, to the more recent AirPods wireless earbuds, Apple is constantly introducing new “needs” and “wants” to its potential customer base—needs and wants that never existed before.

This is a giant leap beyond typical customer communication, which begins and ends with the interaction at hand.

Customers Using Foreshadowing Honesty with You

Organizations are strongest when their customers use foreshadowing honesty with them, too. In this case, customers will talk openly about their needs, wants, and ideas for the future. They’ll also freely discuss their concerns about potential problems, allowing the organization to get ahead of impending issues that would affect the customer base.

The result is a truly symbiotic relationship between organization and customer that ultimately leads to accelerated business growth.

4 Keys to Achieving Foreshadowing Honesty

So, how can your organization achieve the gold standard of getting the unsaid said, both internally and externally?

Maybe your business relationships are currently governed by reactive or proactive honesty—or perhaps certain people in your organization are totally shut down. No matter your current level of getting the unsaid said, there are several key elements that can propel your entire team to move up the ladder. It's important to note that each one of these elements directly impacts the other—none of them can exist alone, and they're all interconnected.

The following 4 factors must be in place at any organization in order to achieve foreshadowing honesty:

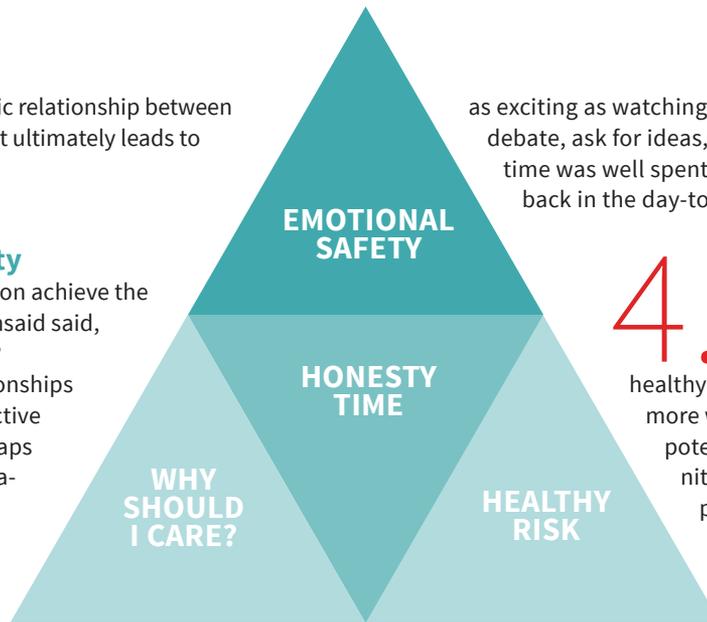
1 Emotional safety. A work environment where people feel emotionally safe is key to moving up the communication ladder. If people don't feel safe, they won't share their ideas or opinions—it's as simple as that. Employees need to feel confident that they won't be penalized or ostracized for sharing unpopular ideas or negative feedback. The organization should be a "safe space" where people can share their thoughts without fear of retribution.

2 Why Should I Care? There must be clear answer to this question for everyone at the organization. In other words, there should be clear benefits or rewards to speaking openly and honestly with colleagues, managers, or executives. For example, if employees see that being open about their challenges creates positive change in their day-to-day lives, they'll continue to share ideas. When there's tangible value in being honest at an organization, people are far more likely to speak out. Other benefits and rewards that will compel employees to embrace open communication include career progression or promotion, reduced workplace stress, increased morale among their colleagues, and being able to make a real difference in improving the business.

3 Honesty time. Honesty time is actual quality time set aside specifically for getting the unsaid said. While getting the unsaid said doesn't necessarily require a lot of time, it does require quality time committed to fostering open discussions. Otherwise, it's impossible to reach the level of foreshadowing honesty. For example, team meetings should be spent engaging employees and solving issues rather than simply debriefing employees—which is about

as exciting as watching paint dry. Encourage positive debate, ask for ideas, and then show others that their time was well spent by actually using their feedback in the day-to-day routine.

4 Healthy risk. Simply put, if people are afraid to take risk, they're less likely to be open. If your organization embraces healthy risk, then employees will be more willing to predict or foreshadow potential problems and opportunities. A culture of healthy risk promotes the free sharing of information and ideas, because people aren't afraid to rock the boat.



What to Do Moving Forward

Learning to identify your organization's current level of getting the unsaid said—both externally and internally—can be a catalyst for powerful change.

To fully leverage the powerful advice in this article, have your team at work read through it and rate your organization's current communication level. Ask them to think about how they interact with colleagues, managers, and executives, internally; how they interact with customers, externally; and how customers interact with them. Once your team completes this exercise, you will be able to gauge what you need to do to move up the communication ladder, until everyone is consistently practicing foreshadowing honesty.

As a leading expert on honesty and communication, I've worked with top organizations around the world to assess their level of getting the unsaid said. The vast majority discover they're operating at the reactive level—only some at the proactive level. Once these companies decide to "get the unsaid said" and practice foreshadowing honesty across the organization, they achieve powerful bottom-line results.

It's all about unlocking the value of getting the unsaid said. As strong as your organization might be today, imagine how successful it could be if everyone practiced foreshadowing honesty, at every stage of the business. The first step is to learn where you currently stand. Then, we can work together to develop a plan that moves your organization to the very top. ↻



Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, team performance, leadership, and change management. He has worked with numerous Fortune 500 organizations to increase revenue and drive profit, as well as with many governmental agencies to better allocate resources and taxpayer dollars. Thousands credit Gaffney's seminars, media appearances, books, and products with making immediate and lasting changes in both their organizations and personal lives. He is also the author of two groundbreaking books, *Just Be Honest* and *Honesty Works*, and the coauthor of *Honesty Sells*. For more information on Steven Gaffney, please visit www.stevengaffney.com.