Hey Boss . . .
What Your Employees Are Thinking and Not Telling You

Chances are, your employees aren't going to come up to you one day and give you a piece of their mind. This could be for many reasons—maybe they don't feel comfortable, maybe you don't have a culture of transparency, or maybe they value their jobs, to name a few. Or maybe they consider you to be scary and intimidating (in which case, you should probably smile more).

But whatever the reason, there are likely a lot of things that your employees are thinking, but wouldn't ever dare to tell you. Here are five of them.

"Sometimes, we know best."

In a recent Fierce survey on management best practices and their effectiveness, 98% of workers stated that a leader's decision-making process should include input from everyone impacted by the decision. Sounds great—but 40% of those surveyed also said that leaders continuously fail to ask.

When you need to make an important decision, don't forget to consult the people closest to the issue—your employees. They know their work the best, and will often have important insights and knowledge that you aren't familiar with because you're more focused on the "big picture." Seek out their diverse perspectives while inviting pushback and challenges. Your employees' insights will not only lead to the best decisions for your team and the company, they will also enrich your relationships with them.

"There's something glaringly wrong with your organization, and everyone knows it but you."

If you're losing clients and/or employees are disengaged or leaving, it's probably not them – it's you. The secret to avoiding this fate is looking for patterns. If more than one employee approaches you or management with a similar concern, there's a good chance they're not crazy, it's a systemic problem and something needs to be fixed. The key here is never to be defensive with employees. Business owners have to make a lot of tough decisions, and it's understandable to get frustrated when employees question them. Never negate employee problems. Instead ask them to come back to you with a proposal for implementing change. If nothing else, their suggestions might provide some insight into what the problem really is. There's also a chance they'll realize that solving the problem is a bigger hurdle than they originally thought and empathize with your approach. Let employees wear the leader hat every once in a while. It can shed new light for both parties.

"We need some breathing room."

Your employees want to be autonomous and have the freedom to make decisions. They aren't interested in being treated like cogs in a machine. They want to have their hands on the steering wheel and have a clear understanding of their role in the big picture. (Yes, basically all of the things *you* wanted earlier in your career).

You may say you trust your employees to make their own decisions, but they will only truly be empowered when they understand which decisions are theirs to make. Make sure what you say and how you behave are in line with each other. For example, if you tell your employees that they can be the lead on a project, but you offer feedback and make changes, employees may not be sure of their role in the decision process. Set clear delegation guidelines, establishing which decisions need to be jointly made, which should be passed along to you or other managers, and which decisions you're entrusting to your employees. Then, stick to them.

"We want to know what's going on."

All too often, there's an overall lack of trust in organizations. In the Fierce survey, 50% of employees identified a lack of company-wide transparency and too little employee involvement in company decisions as their key areas of concern. And 21% of employees dislike that information is disseminated at their companies on a "need-to-know" basis, rather than freely and openly.

The reality is, in the absence of communication, people fill the void with often-incorrect information — and it's rarely positive. For example, employees will assume you're not communicating because the company is in trouble or hiding something. Now, maybe it is, and maybe you think you're protecting your employees by not sharing information. However, many employees would rather be trusted so they can have ownership and actively participate in solving problems.

Build your employees' trust by communicating as often and as openly as you can, welcoming questions, and allowing people to have insight into the decision-making process. There may still be some information you can't share, but sharing what you can and encouraging people to ask you questions (even if you sometimes answer "I don't know" or "I can't go any deeper") will show your team that you trust them and make them feel like they're in the know.

"We want to have a relationship with you."

As a leader, it's sometimes difficult to balance how to connect with your team, how to lead them, and how to be sensitive to those who want to keep their professional and personal lives separate. But the thing is, most of the time, your employees want to have a relationship with you. In another Fierce survey about employees' relationships with supervisors, 75% claim their relationships with their bosses have a direct effect on their job satisfaction. By opening up and connecting with them, you'll build their trust, improve workplace morale, and be able to better relate to them as people and as co-workers.

Check in with your team on a daily basis to understand how they are doing, both personally and professionally. This should be more than just a brief "How are you doing?"—it should be sincere and unique for each person. Get curious and ask questions to gain a deeper understanding of the people you're working with.

The biggest takeaway from these five points is that employees crave communication. They want honest, open conversations with each other and with their leaders, and they want to feel heard and appreciated. So don't be afraid to ask questions, value different opinions, and be as transparent as possible. You'll eventually create a company culture where employees feel comfortable to come up to you and speak their mind—no longer wishing you knew something, and instead telling you directly.

Key sources for this article:

- Holly Bock: https://www.themuse.com/advice/what-your-employees-wont-tell-you-but-wish-you-knew
- The Alternative Board: http://www.thealternativeboard.com/what-your-employees-arent-telling-you/