



White Paper

Completing the Circle: Our Need for Closure

By John Parker Stewart & Daniel Stewart

George Carlin, a well-known comedian, did a routine years back called the 10 o'clock news. He began the sketch with some innocuous local story. He then explained the weather, inserting quips here and there. Lastly, he would assume the personality of a famous sports announcer and give some sports scores. He ended the sketch with, "Well folks, we're out of time. Oh, wait. Here's a partial score hot off the wire. 'Michigan 26.' Well goodnight folks!" Though laughing, the audience was left wondering, "Who did they play? What was the score of the other team? Furthermore, what was the sport?" This is a comical illustration of an important leadership tenet: the need for providing closure.

We have a basic need to know how things end up, especially if the outcome will affect us. If you spend five days preparing a proposal, you will naturally be very interested in the affect the proposal might have. Will they accept it? Will it be ridiculed? Did I make any mistakes? Did they love it? In essence, you want closure.

It is a human need to know the end result of our efforts. We want to know how the decision was reached, what the decision was, and how what happened might affect our lives. We want to know so badly that we will often make up details or imagine outcomes just to satisfy our curiosity. This is particularly true for our employees. Providing another person with closure is helpful and courteous, but more importantly it engenders trust.

An Incomplete Circle

To illustrate this principle in our seminars, one of us draws an incomplete circle on the white board. We don't mention the disconnect in the circle nor do we mention the circle, but immediately begin a competitive team exercise unrelated to the partial circle. At the conclusion of the activity, we stop the stopwatch, mention what fun we had, pause briefly, and then proceed onto the next activity. Neither of us explain what the point of the exercise was nor do we give them the answers. We

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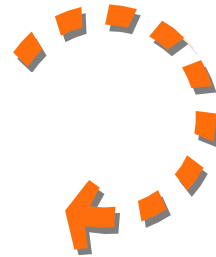
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merely continue as if all 26 people are not anxiously awaiting the results of the team competition.

These people just worked intensely for 35 minutes to beat the other teams and they don't know who won. They want to know the correct answers! We know that each person is inwardly anxious to know the results. As one of us intentionally begins lecturing on some other principle, we allow the collective uncertainty to hang in the air as long as possible. It does not take long until someone in the class says, "Hey! You going to give us the answers to that exercise?"



We'll respond, as poker-faced as possible, "What exercise?"

"The one we just did! We just spent 35 minutes busting our backsides trying to figure this out and beat the other teams! How did we do?"

One of us looks at the person and says, "You want to know the answers to that game, do you? That is really a childish need. I cannot believe it.

"Are you saying that knowing the answers to that silly teambuilding exercise is going to make you a better leader? Is it going to enhance your career performance? Is it going to make you respond to your people better? Not a chance. That was just a little team exercise to illustrate a point. The point was illustrated. We can now move on."

By this point, confusion and irritation are high. Three or four others chime in as well saying, "Well, we have a right to know! You've gotta tell us the answer! You can't do this to us!"

Then we finally concede, "Exactly. Exactly. I have just illustrated a critical leadership principle." One of us writes c-l-o-s-u-r-e above the partially closed circle and explain why it is so important. We emphasize our need to know the end result even if it seems trivial. We also explain that too often the leader may be able to satisfy his or her curiosity and receive closure, but forget to provide closure to his or her people. That is a detrimental situation—a serious faux pas in effective leadership.

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The Silent Director

Let us illustrate. Several years ago, John, one of the co-authors, worked with a director who was responsible for 1800 employees. He had met with many of the key employees months before in several leadership workshops he had facilitated. In each workshop, he asked them to tell me what concerns they had about the organization. Each session produced a long list. He summarized all of these lists from the various off-site meetings and presented it to the director. The final list had several hundred items and he agreed to address each issue on the list.

About 3 months later he called the director to follow up on the list of concerns. The director responded, “Thanks for following up, but, ummm, I’m kind of embarrassed.”

“You’re embarrassed? Why?” John replied.

The director sheepishly retorted, “I haven’t gotten back to my people on any of the issues on the list.”

Unsurprised, John said, “ You know, that’s why I called. I’ve heard whispers that you hadn’t done anything. Your people are very upset and disturbed that the input sessions I held were just for show. They want to hear back from you. They want closure.”

He said, “Well, then I need some help. There are a few things I need to be coached on. Can you meet me in my office later this week?”

Later, as John entered his office, he pulled out the list of 200 plus items. “I’ve divided the list into three sections,” he explained. “The first section involves relatively easy fixes—I’ve been able to resolve these items. The next section contains actions I’m still trying to address. I spend chunks of time wrestling with these problems. The last section covers issues that clearly cannot be resolved.”

After being pleasantly surprised at the work he had done John stated, “That was a fair and honest explanation. In fact, that’s all you people expect. What has stopped you from delivering that quick briefing? You could have done that weeks ago.”

He smiled and shyly replied, “But, I...wanted to be able to solve all of these.”

John said, “If you waited until everything on that list was addressed, it would be months or maybe even years before you ever got back to them. There is nothing wrong with sharing intermediate progress, even if it may be small. For example, you could share your 3 sections. You could share the things that have been done. You could explain why certain action items cannot be completed. And you can be frank about what you are still working on. Your people will be updated and know that you are genuinely trying to address their inputs. They will have closure and feel a sense of ownership or partnership with you in trying to improve the organization. They may even be able to help you accomplish some of the on going items.”

This is not a unique experience. Sometimes we think we must accomplish everything perfectly before giving updates and feedback. We may feel that others will view our partial efforts as unsatisfactory. Yet, letting your people know where you stand on issues they have presented to you can create a strong alliance between boss and direct report, peer to peer, and especially customer to customer. We must not forget to follow up and provide closure with those who have a vested interest in the decision making process.

3 Levels of News

Much of the need for closure is based on the necessity to have information and to feel included. Did you know there are 3 levels of news? First is good news. We all love good news. We are usually quick in sharing it. However, we are reluctant to share the second type of news—bad news. Few people enjoy giving or receiving bad news. We often avoid mentioning bad news, so we sugar coat it or enhance it in some way. Thus, bad news often becomes the third type of news—no news.

Here is the question: What kind of news do you prefer. No doubt it is good news. That is understandable; I prefer it as well. What kind of news would you prefer next—bad news or no news? Most people avoid bad news, so they say no news. Let's test out your preference with this example.

Imagine you're calling the loan department of your bank. You say, "Hello, I filed a mortgage application a few weeks back and I was wondering if it's been approved." You wait patiently as the clerk pulls up your file on the computer. "What do you mean it's going through another committee? Look, this is the fifth time I've called and I want to know if I've been approved or not. If I don't qualify, let me know so I can go another route." Considering this example, would you prefer bad news or no news? Here is another example.

"Most people would rather have bad news than no news."

After a long job application process you finally call the hiring manager, identify yourself and say, "I've been through three job interviews over the last three months, and I would like to know whether I'm still being considered for the position?" You listen quietly to the explanation the situation. You then respond, "How many more days is this going to take?... You have to present my application to another committee? Okay. And after that, when will they decide? Look, if you don't want to hire me, just let me know." Still think no news is better than bad news.

Both of these examples illustrate that no news is worse than bad news. We first want good news. Then we'll take bad news. But, people never want no news. In fact, a work force, if given no news, will often fill in the blanks with their own made up information. Ironically, the fabricated details tend to be worse than the actual.

If you want inaccurate rumors and incorrect assumptions about senior management and company policy, then don't deliver any news and don't provide any closure. But if you want to help people understand the situation, then give them the truth. Offer an explanation, but be straight and honest with them. Yes, we want good news. But if we can't get good news, then give the bad. Never leave your people hanging with no news at all. The effort to correct exaggerated rumors is far worse than the momentary let down from hearing bad news.

Close the Gap

People deserve closure. Do not forget to follow up and tell them what happened. Write it down and share the information with them. Even if it's not directly connected with their work—they still would like to know. Remember to never let the gap in the circle remain. Close the gap and your people will be happier and more responsive. They will feel included, which is a powerful human need.