J. GERALD SUAREZ

Managing Fear

Fear need not always be with us. Eliminating fear at work allows us to work effectively toward the aims of the organization.

ELIMINATING FEAR IS NECESSARY to create an environment of trust and cooperation, essential ingredients to sustain total quality, pursue continuous improvement, encourage innovation, and achieve customer delight.

Fear is a distracting force that robs people and organizations of their potential. Fear destroys trust and quality of work life. Fear is a barrier to better results. Fear motivates toward avoidance of the perceived danger, not toward constructive action and better performance. Fear nourishes competition, anxiety, and suboptimization, as the performance of one person or one process creates a chain reaction of negative behaviors.

Fear erodes joy in work, limits communication, and stifles innovation. Fear fosters short-term thinking as people search to avoid reprisal, perhaps at the expense of others in the system.

Fear also produces questionable data, as people tend to focus on eliminating the threat instead of working to achieve the desired positive outcomes. As Edmund Burke said: "No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

Perhaps the total economic cost of fear will always be an unknown. Lloyd S. Nelson says, "The most important figures that one needs for management are unknown or unknowable but successful management must nevertheless take account of them." Fear is indeed one of those unknowables that managers must take into account.

Fear is a Fact of Life

Everyone experiences fear one way or another. Even courageous people experience fear. Courage is not the absence of fear but the management of fear. Fear is to an organization what high blood pressure is to the human body—a silent killer! It can go unnoticed, but its effects are devastating.

If you are a leader, you need to assess the fear in your organization. Most behaviors and language that you observe and hear in meetings tell you a great deal about the fear in your culture.

What are your people afraid of?

1. Fear of reprisal or a poor appraisal. This fear generates please-the-boss, look-good-at-any-cost, or do-what-you're-told behaviors. Fear of being disciplined or receiving a poor rating can lead to behavior that pleases the boss at the expense of others, even customers.
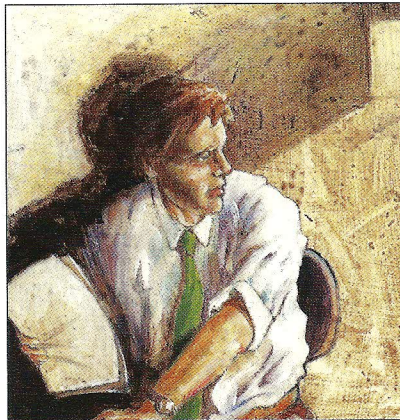
2. Fear of failure. This is tied to fear of reprisal because reprisal is usually an outcome of failure. Fear of failure is associated with lack of risk taking and innovation. Avoiding failure tends to undermine achievement-oriented activities, leading to defensiveness, skepticism, and apathy.

3. Fear of success. People fear that success may damage peer relationships, create enemies, and promote jealousy, envy, and ever-higher expectations.

4. Fear of new knowledge. People who are afraid of math transfer their fear to the use of the tools and methods associated with total quality. This fear is also linked to fear of new knowledge. They might say, "These tools are good for my people, not for me," or "We don't have the time to learn all that."

5. Fear of change. With the fear of change comes resistance to change and the attitude that "We've always done it this way, why change now?" People resist change, because they're content with what is familiar, fear losing something (like power), or see it as a threat to their security or valued beliefs.

6. Fear of speaking up. People fear speaking up because of management's tendency to kill the messenger. Managers must forgive mistakes and provide a forum so that everyone can learn from them and share solutions with others.

7. Fear of not making a mark on one's "watch." Fear of missing the mark is widespread, especially when executives are focused on short-term goals and instant gain. Total quality requires a significant investment in time, effort, and resources. Attempts to achieve quick results easily lead to chaos and low productivity.

Creating a Fearless Environment

Three elements serve as catalysts in creating an environment in which people can cope with fear.

1. Leadership. To minimize and manage fear, leaders must create an environment where employees can share information without concern about repercussions. Fast response is the best incentive to keep people communicating their concerns and innovative ideas. Leaders must reward cooperation, innovation, heroic efforts, and real contributions.

2. Trust. Trust is a necessary condition for cooperation and communication. As trust builds, people gain confidence that their ideas will be dealt with responsibly, and will not result in negative repercussions. The higher the trust, the more open the communication, and the more stable the cooperation. Low trust leads to uncertainty and defensiveness.

3. Vision. A vision statement provides guidance by revealing what the leaders perceive will be in the future. It gives people the sense that the leaders are planning and acting to be in business for many years, which reduces fear. Vision statements are essential for transformation because they supply a framework to guide day-to-day decisions, priorities and parameters. A vision statement provides direction, describes the aim, and pulls people together to work toward the desired future. Visions serve as fear busters by providing constancy of purpose.

These key elements—leadership, trust, and vision—create win-win dynamics in the organization.   **EE**