Beware of the Nod

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The GM "head nod" is common symptom of leadership malaise that seems to be spreading from one organization to the next.

If you're not familiar with this symptom, it's documented in the recent General Motors report conducted by outside attorney Anton Valukas in response to their ignition switch defect problems. The report notes that GM employees would nod their heads during problem-solving meetings in acknowledgment of actions they needed to take even though they had no intention of taking them.

This head nod is becoming endemic in organizations, a kind of passive-aggressive response to certain organizational objectives. While GM's management must have given lip service to the importance of quality and safety standards, the rank-and-file knew what really mattered was keeping costs down, meeting deadlines and delivering short-term results. The head nod helped maintain the illusion that these issues are being addressed.

GM isn't alone in this head-nodding response. In the years I was at Avon Products, most managers knew that the company had to create more centralized control over offices in various global markets such as China and Brazil. Andrea Jung, the CEO from 1999-2012 communicated this requirement clearly. Yet few actions were taken to address problems such as country leaders acting in ways that didn't fit the culture or the larger business strategy; or selling products that were no longer part of the company's product mix; or unethical actions that may have been standard operating procedure in other countries but were unacceptable practices in the Western world.

Just like at GM, Avon managers nodded when these problems were raised and solutions proposed. The nods acknowledged that these were serious issues and they agreed that something should be done about them. But there were more immediate concerns, higher priority issues. And so, while some efforts were made to centralize control and impose uniform standards, these efforts were only sporadically effective.

Ultimately, the company was devastated by a Chinese bribery scandal and Securities Exchange Commission investigation, and Andrea Jung left the company because of it.

The current Veterans Administration scandal also sounds like managers indulged in this head nodding practice. As you'll recall, local administrators put pressure to fudge patient waiting times because their bonuses were tied to these reductions. I'm sure that senior VA leadership didn't encourage managers to fake these reductions; they must have emphasized the importance of meeting the needs of patients. Yet even as lower level VA employees received

memos and heard speeches about cutting the waiting times, the actions by their managers didn't match the rhetoric. If they could make the waiting times look good on paper (or, more accurately, on the computer), why struggle with the much more difficult task of getting patients in sooner, especially with fewer resources So the managers nodded their heads when told what the organizational goals were and carried on with their own agendas.

If the leadership of GM, Avon and the VA had to do it all over again, I would bet they would institute new practices designed to prevent this insincere head-nodding response. Here are three best practices all leaders should implement:

- Be sure you're spending time on the critical operational details, especially if that's where your organization is struggling. Strategy and vision are vital but it's very easy for CEOs to be out of touch with what's really going on, especially when they are concentrating on crafting and communicating eloquent visions for their organizations. Nothing against eloquent visions, but they don't do much good when the nuts-and-bolts of getting things done are ignored. Companies need specific plans in place to increase quality, centralize control and provide better customer service, and they need to make managers accountable for these objectives. Remember, too, that accountability starts at the top—if senior leaders aren't living up to their responsibilities and following through, then it's unrealistic to expect accountability at other levels.

- Internalize messages. Former GE Jack Welch used to deliver the same speech over and over to his people during the company's transformation. He used every opportunity available to him to deliver his "stump speech". And he would deliver the message in writing, in one-on-one conversations and in 101 other ways. He wasn't beating people over the head with what he wanted them to do as much as driving it into their consciousness so they took it seriously. Too often, leaders think they can drive a point home through a single Power Point presentation. It doesn't work that way. If companies want their people to walk the talk, then they better make sure they deliver that talk consistently, repeatedly and innovatively.

- Tear down bad news shields. At GM, Avon and the VA, senior leaders seemed to have been protected from the bad news—from realizing how serious each of their situations had become. Companies do this routinely, sometimes because they're afraid of how leaders will react to the bad news and sometimes out of the misguided impulse to keep the top people from getting in trouble. CEOs and other senior leaders need to make it clear to everyone that they want the bad news first and fast. This is the only way they can take action before a scandal or other problem spirals out of control.

Yes, these actions require that leaders invest more time and energy in communication and operations, not always the favorite activities of busy CEOs and other senior executives. But the investment is worth it, especially if they're talking to a roomful of managers about a critical issue, they see a lot of nodding heads but are uncertain what those nods really mean.