

“An honest confession is good for the soul, but bad for the reputation.” – Thomas Dewar

“As a leader, be careful who you 'vent' to...”

By Michael Comer, D.M. – President of The Hayes Group International, Inc.

Like many of us, early in my career I learned a very important lesson. Recently out of graduate school and 24 years old, my first job was with Andersen Consulting on K Street in Washington, DC (at the time the largest consulting firm in the world). I had been assigned to a long-time client on a one-year project and was temporarily doing reconciliations for a government new chart of accounts. Although my degree was in economics and I had a newly-minted MBA, I was not an accountant and needless to say "reconciliation of accounts" was not my forte or interest.

After spending 14 straight days working 10 to 12 hours trying to reconcile charts of accounts, the folders (yes it was all paper-based then) were piling up to almost two feet on my desk. I finally decided to take a break and go to lunch one day in the client cafeteria. My supervisor's manager, Ira, asked if he could join me at the table and introduced me to a new Andersen employee who was joining us on her first day of work; freshly matriculated from her graduate studies at the nearby University of Maryland.

Ira made the unfortunate mistake of asking me on my 14th day of constant frustration how things were going for me work-wise (as any good manager should do). Regrettably for me, I replied "Rotten. Absolutely rotten - ever since the day since I started on this project." Ira was wise enough to change the subject. Remember he was 26 years old and I was a mere 24. However, the written comment of "Mike has a bad job attitude" showed up on my performance review about four months later - added by Ira. Keep in mind it was only "one" comment on "one" bad day!

I learned an important lesson that day: "Be careful who you vent to."

Who do you "vent" to?

I have asked that question to dozens of senior leaders in some of the world's largest organizations over the past 30 years as a leadership coach and as a friend.

Leaders in organizations are constantly looked up to and in most cases seen as role models. "Venting" at the wrong time and to the wrong person can hurt your career and sometimes destroy your leadership persona.

I believe leaders should never "vent" down - and need to be very careful and nuanced when they "vent up" - even if their immediate boss welcomes them to "vent to me." Having done hundreds (not an exaggerated number) of 360s with leaders in over 100 organizations (not an exaggerated number either) often people are surprised when comments come back from a boss or even a peer that states "makes unwise comments", "frequently complains", is not seen as a "*positive* role model", or "has a bad attitude about his work"! The leader being coached says "but they welcomed me to vent". My advice is "Be careful where and when you vent!"

To whom do we usually "vent"?

Family and close friends: If you are like most leaders you probably vent to family and/or close friends. A spouse, partner, long term friend can be trusted, is removed from the day-to-day situation and are hopefully good listeners. They can provide an "outside perspective" and, if like my spouse, can let you know when to "suck it up" or "that's a really legitimate complaint." Although I must admit these days I have little to vent about and certainly less venting than in my first job, which wasn't a great fit. (That is another article for another time!)

Caution! Although family is often a place for venting and sharing work frustrations, don't overuse that privilege. Friends can suddenly realize "He only talks about work and work problems" or partners can begin to think "Is there nothing positive at all about that job?" I believe good leaders talk about and have a healthy balance of positives and negatives. Just be aware if you are constantly "venting" to someone that you include those good times and positives too. Don't forget to share the positives.

Bosses: Remember my advice listed above regarding 360 comments. Great bosses who are also "trusted" bosses welcome employees to come into their offices, shut the door, and "vent" (as long as it is done in a respectful way). However, another dose of caution. The boss must be a trusted colleague and don't overuse that privilege. Daily complaints and emotional outbursts do not help your advancement. Perhaps the adage should not just be "confession is good for the soul" but "*confession is good for the soul, but bad for the career*".

Direct reports: NEVER!

Peers: Many of the leaders I work with in multiple corporations have developed close peer relationships - trusted friends who are in similar situations and who understand the people, organization and context (as family and friends may not). Again, this can be a good source for a sounding board or to give expression to daily frustrations - but ensure the "venting" is not overdone, is discussed in the right tone, time & place, and that the element of "trust" is there. Caution here too!

Mentors/Coaches: It may sound as if I am touting my own career (and our company) and I probably am, but a good source for venting is a long-term mentor or an external coach. Usually long-term mentors have great experience and may or may not be involved in the same organization. External coaches usually know the organization and people fairly well and if they are good at what they do - will listen, can be trusted, will listen more, will frame the venting in terms of context and people, and still listen again. They will help you find a solution (versus giving you one) or sometimes just be that sounding

board without unsolicited advice or premature judging (which is sometimes hard for a family member or peer to do). Here's a thought, find a good mentor/coach and let him or her listen as you give voice to on-going frustrations.

Who do you vent to? If you have work and people frustrations, you are normal! It is how we handle these frustrations and how we vent these frustrations that can test the mettle of trusted leaders. Timing is important! (Don't vent to your manager's manager at lunch with a new employee on her first day). Place is important! (Don't vent in the middle of the board room meeting or on the factory floor). Tone and emotion is important. (Count backwards from 30 to 20 - there is thought among some neurologists that counting backwards in the middle of the number line changes the emotional climate).

Confession is good for the soul...

When I first heard this adage I had googled that phrase and the search result said "Confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation - Thomas." I assumed that some great philosopher like Thomas Aquinas had made the comment. But when I clicked on the reference the phrase "Confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation" was said not by Thomas Aquinas (who *may* have said the soul part) but by Thomas Dewar. "Tommy" Dewar was a Scottish whiskey distiller who with his brother built his family name and business "Dewars" into an international brand. A whiskey distiller should certainly know about how honest confession can affect the reputation (especially after a few tastings). Note: Tommy Dewar has some great quotes - Google him.

Venting is much needed in our business worlds, especially in today's crazy busy and stressful environment. But strong leaders are constantly aware of messages they are sending, are careful about who and when they vent, and balance the frustrations with the positives.

Like many lessons we learn early in our careers, my personal story had a positive ending. It seems the Andersen partner (my boss's, boss's, boss's boss) happened to read by performance evaluation and said "If Mike Comer has a bad attitude about work - I wish everyone here had a bad attitude!" A few days after that comment Ira asked to take me to lunch (and without the new person this time). At lunch he said (in his 27 year old wisdom after a discussion with the partner in charge). "I've been thinking that the comment about job attitude was not fair and was a one-time event. I've decided that we should remove the comment before submitting to HR."

A great personal and leadership lesson at age 24 that has lasted for years (and shared with others) - *Be careful who you vent to!*

Dr. Michael Comer is a President of The Hayes Group International in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He has worked with Hayes for over 15 years in a variety of corporations and international organizations. For more information on the Hayes Group International visit www.thehayesgroupintl.com