

# The executive denial phenomenon



by Garland C. McWatters Jr.

I had completed a rather extensive interview series with over one hundred employees in a company to assess how to approach a management development course I was to deliver. At the conclusion of the interviews I asked a junior manager who had accompanied me on the interviews what he had learned from hearing the employees talk about their experiences and concerns. He replied somewhat dismissively, "I didn't hear anything new. I've heard it all before." I wanted to scream at him, "Then why haven't you done anything about it?" But I held my tongue.

When I reported the findings to the senior management staff I got similar comments along with others like, "Well, they just don't understand. It's not as bad as they claim. It's just their perspective, but they don't know why things are the way they are." Unfortunately, those dismissive comments run rampant in organizations of all sizes and types. I, too, had heard it all before.

I wonder what it is about us that causes us to dismiss contrary information? Is it that we simply don't wish to believe it? In the corporate setting I call this frame of mind the *executive denial phenomenon*.

## A close encounter of the terminal kind

I recently had a personal episode in which I realized that I had, to my own detriment, been victim of this same executive denial phenomenon. I was diagnosed with diabetes about ten years ago. I changed doctors recently, and she changed my treatment to bring my diabetes under control. She also sent me to a cardiologist for a stress test, which revealed that my heart was not pumping properly. Within the week stints were inserted into two of the primary arteries in my heart which were 99 and 95 percent blocked. The doctors showed me before-and-after photos of the arteries. I honestly believe I was days away from a heart-attack.

Now, here's the sad part. I had information dating back six years that all the conditions existed for such an episode. The lab reports for years had been telling me my diabetes was not controlled, my cholesterol was out of whack, and my blood pressure was too high: report after report which I had chosen to dismiss. After all, I felt OK. I could jog several miles at a time. I was young. I boasted—as I took another bite of cinnamon apple crisp *a la mode*—that although I was diabetic, I was otherwise in great health. I'm surprised that my doctor didn't scream in my face, "Then why haven't you done anything about it?" It was a close call, and I've learned from it.

## Change or risk death

My admonition to senior managers and executives from this experience is believe the information or risk suffering the consequences. Over the years front-line and mid-level managers have told me their biggest frustration is getting senior level managers to listen to information and believe both its accuracy and relevance. I hear executives say, "we're doing OK. It's not so bad. They just don't understand. The information is incomplete. We're going to be fine." Then when trends take a downturn they go bad quickly. They are costly to turn around, and sometimes the results are deadly for the company. The sad truth is the signs were there all along, but everyone at the top acts surprised. Too often they are in executive denial.

## Collateral damage

My doctor told me the diabetes might not kill me, but the collateral damage on my heart and other systems would. It almost did. So it is with executive denial. Left uncorrected the collateral damage of executive denial creates a communication disconnect between the front office and the front line. This, in turn, contributes to a lack of trust, a feeling of disempowerment and a sense of helplessness among the troops. Then one day executives look up to find

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competitors springing up, their market advantage gone, their resources depleted and their best talent abandoning ship, and they wonder what happened—and when.

Here's the kicker: that's when I get a call to come in and address the problem. Executives often describe the symptoms in grave detail then tell me the solution is to train the troops. Give them supervisor training, conflict resolution training, process improvement training or some such remedy they have selected. But the executives themselves opt out of any instruction for themselves. They don't see that they are part of the problem and, indeed, might be the ultimate source of the problem.

### **A comprehensive remedy: reality to recovery**

There is only one remedy I know of: executives must accept reality and treat all information as relevant and authentic even if they disagree with it or would rather not hear it. Then, just as in my own rehabilitation, they must do the hard work of recovery.

I have this quote from Admiral Jim Stockdale, a former Vietnam POW, framed and sitting on the corner of my desk, "You must never confuse the faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

I have the faith that I will survive my medical challenges, but only if I believe in the brutal facts of their reality and do the work to recover from them. That means owning up to my own culpability when I don't take my medicine as prescribed, don't get the exercise I need or eat the food I know will clog my arteries or flood my system with too much sugar.

Executives, there is information all around you coming from subordinates who want you and your company to thrive. Their vested interest is in your success and in the good health of your company. They are on the front lines interacting with customers, employees, vendors, competitors and the community.

They design, implement and monitor the business processes that generate the income you count on as the life blood of your enterprise. Communication flow in your company is controlled from your office suite. Keep it open and clear. You know I speak the truth.

Executives, open yourselves to continuing professional and personal development. You can always improve your management abilities. I recently heard Eileen Fisher, a successful fashion designer, say in a television feature about her management practices, that the bottom line is just numbers that reflect what's happening in the center. If the center is right, the numbers will be right.

She was talking about your heart and soul that has to keep pace with, if not out pace, your intellectual and business acumen. The hard work is to tend to the whole you that requires an open heart to go with an open mind—the center that allows you to reach out to all the elements of your enterprise to respond and react to things as they are. Listen to the pulse of your company and make your decisions with the clarity and certainty that you have nothing to gain from executive denial.