Transparency and Trust in Times of Transition

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Across our organization, I continue to hear calls to increase transparency. This month's column explores transparency in AECT and focuses on ways we can leverage transparency toward culture change. I'd like to open with a quote from Jack Welch about transparency that I think is key to understanding how transparency works:

"Leaders establish trust with candor, transparency and credit."

I like what Welch is saying here, because it is not just about sharing information, it is also about being honest and up front and sharing credit. Transparency has become a "buzz word" across all industries, politics, even the whole of society. The reason that we care about transparency as leaders is because without it, there's no space to build trust. Transparency is a multi-step effort that needs constant attention. Here I'm sharing several specific ways that transparency can build a culture of trust across AECT:

Start at the top A first step toward transparency is ensuring that we are transparent among our leadership, executive committee, standing and governance committees, AECT staff, divisional leadership and the Board. As with all good leadership practices, modeling the proper behaviors with honest, forthright and continuously updated information across our organization needs to be modeled from leadership.

Build on a Stakeholder Foundation Effective change occurs with broad stakeholder participation. User-designed systems demonstrate more success and sustainability over time and leaders who impose changes rarely succeed. Stakeholders understand how to route around central authority to avoid or actively undermine changes that they don't want. Transparency serves to fully involve stakeholders and inform them

of ongoing change processes. Transparency should be seen through the lens of user-design as a way to promote sustainable change.

Decision-making In a transparent and trusting culture, decision-makers are prepared to explain and justify their decisions. People within the organization must understand why a particular decision was made and that justification should make sense. A complete discussion of process and criteria for decisions should be openly shared and should include information on who was consulted. Being honest and direct in explaining decisions is a cornerstone of effective transparency. We must all remember that reasonable minds may disagree on a particular decision, but we should remain open to really listening to other perspectives, change a decision when needed and avoid defensiveness or obfuscation when explaining decisions. Through this process, generally, decisions can be supported more broadly once they are made and enacted.

Widespread Communication It is vital that communication reaches as far into the organization as possible so that rumors and games of "telephone" don't muddy the messages. Again, when trust is the goal of transparency, widespread communication in a timely way is imperative. Information should not be power, it should be readily shared and freely available to all.

To tell the truth... It is imperative that we all employ more candor and honesty in our everyday communications. The world has become increasingly polarized and glossing over facts to help people feel better or more comfortable has become commonplace. To build trust, however, it is imperative that we open ourselves to hard truths, that we tell others difficult things, that we do not respond with defensiveness, retaliation or anger. Candor, as Jack Welch has pointed out, is one of the building blocks of trust. Transparency without candor pays very little long-term benefits to the organization.

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Consistency in Messages One of the reasons that we are very focused on revising our bylaws is to encourage more consistency in processes and policies across the organization. Having clearly written processes rather than relying on tradition or “how we’ve always done it” is paramount to transparency. Without this consistency, there is confusion and openings for misunderstandings. Transparency struggles within this space like a sapling strangled by weeds. When placed atop a foundation of firm, consistent bylaws, transparent communications and information flow can build trust across the organization.

Birds of a Feather It is my hope that by starting from the top to model appropriate transparency, we will all adopt a stance of openness, candor, honesty and forthright communication. Helping people to join together in a more transparent communication model across the entire organization will take all of us, not just some of us. As we move beyond using information as powerful tools to leverage status, or feed gossip, we will work with others who believe in the transparency of information to help communication channels avoid the “drama” of hearsay and theories. With a large base of believers in transparency sharing information and stamping out the few still smoldering rumors, information sharing and transparency across the organization is possible.

Spread it Around One of the things that academics haven’t always been excellent at is sharing the credit when something great is accomplished. My first mentor, Phil Doughty, used to encourage us with the phrase, “Of Me I Sing.” As students we needed to learn the importance of letting people know about the good work we were doing. This is a difficult and necessary skill, particularly knowing how to do self-promotion with humility and grace. That said, most of us have learned how to do this pretty well. Just as there is an art to self-promotion, there are also more and less effective methods for giving credit to others. Hopefully, many of us have learned the importance of sharing credit and are generous with our praise. Sharing credit helps to enhance your own reputation and doing so without demurring is best. Saying, “Thank you and the credit goes to...” or “It was an amazing team effort, Joe’s work on the slides was invaluable,” is much better than “Oh, it was nothing.” Pointing to specific people and their contributions can help to build trust across the organization. Nobody trusts a boss who takes credit for the good things that others have done as if it was their own work. So, acknowledging the good work of all is an important part of transparency and an essential element in building a culture of trust.

Listening As many of you are already aware, I have opened my weekly office hours to members in hopes of having more opportunities to learn about what is needed by our members,

what they are talking about, and what innovations we should be looking for in the future. It’s important to hear from you. In order for transparency to work effectively, it needs to be as fully informed by all members as possible. This is not a one-way communication process. Just passing down information and decisions from on-high merely replicates existing power dynamics, but trust, the ultimate goal of transparency, requires two-way communication.

What do You Need? We need to know from our members what information is useful, when it’s needed and what is most relevant. The open office hours or emails to any AECT Board member will be a good way to let us know how we can improve transparency. Want to know information about budget, processes, current statistics on membership, decisions...just ask. If you can’t find it on the website (be sure you’re logged in) we need to know so we can make the information readily available. Sometimes it’s true that we don’t know what we don’t know, so we will continue to advocate to make information as freely available across the organization as possible.

Times When We Cannot be Transparent I will ask that our members understand that there are some situations in which we simply cannot extend transparency as far as we would like. When it comes to legal issues, personnel issues, confidential information, pending issues, plans that must have input or agreement from others, announcements that require careful timing to release perhaps due to partnerships, these are times that we may not be able to share information. Doing so can create legal implications, hurt feelings, or a great deal of confusion when things get reversed as sometimes happens. We ask for grace and patience when this occurs. If we have done our jobs well, there will be a good amount of trust in leadership such that you will feel confident that you will know the relevant information as soon as it is able to be shared.

The important thing to understand about transparency is that it is not the end in itself. Yes, sharing information is in itself a good outcome, and having access to current information can help an organization function more smoothly and coherently as a unit. However, the primary reason for transparency as Jack Welch’s quote points out, is to build trust. Trust is the essential building block of a high functioning organization. Because we firmly believe this, AECT leadership is committed to true transparency to build trust across our membership. With this cornerstone in place, the remainder of our foundation can be built such as innovation, shared governance, partnerships, member opportunities for involvement, and culture and climate. Perhaps most importantly, if there was one thing I hope you take away from this column, it would be that your AECT leadership is committed to transparency as far as possible even when it’s

uncomfortable, even when it's not easy, because we believe it will build long-term trust and a positive AECT culture.

Ali Carr-Chellman
2021–2022 AECT President

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