



by Joel Concannon

Leaders have always struggled to balance two virtues of communication: transparency and necessity. They strive to be open and honest with their team, while also controlling the quality of information. Doing one of those too much, or not doing either one enough, can degrade trust in an organization. In my experience, this balance is difficult, but possible.

It requires asking two simple questions: is this information factual, and is this information necessary? If it does not fully meet both of those criteria, it should not be shared. If it cannot be shared, it is important for “ambiguity tolerance” to overcome the discomfort. Let’s take a look at why this is crucial.

### **The Rumor Mill**

Many organizations have active rumor mills, and the military is no exception. The integration of “Rumor Intelligence” (RUMINT) has almost become an acceptable source of facts. This is especially true when not much is known about a deployment or the likelihood of doing something significant. However, letting gossip or unsubstantiated hearsay pass as information can be damaging to an organization, which can be difficult given the human desire to feel informed.

## **The Human Need to Fill Information Voids**

A Soldier once told me “Soldiers take bad news well, but they take no news bad.” He was talking about the information I was pushing down (or not pushing down) about a possible deployment. According to Major Stephen Sheets, an Army Clinical Psychologist, “anxiety often manifests with the need to fill informational voids.” It can be tempting to reduce organizational anxiety and fill this void by providing any detail or information at all. But that may be counterproductive and degrade trust. I’ll share my own mistake to illustrate that.

## **The Danger of Filling the Void With Garbage**

In the case of the Soldier who was hungry for information, I made the mistake of reaching for details I did not have. Since I did not have much, I shared personal opinions and speculations of what certain information *could* suggest. According to Major Sheets, “there is an evolutionary advantage to speculating about potential negative outcomes, as the alternative could have resulted in a lack of preparation when real danger was a part of our ancestor’s lives.” But my speculations were inevitably interpreted as predictions or direction, and it took a lot of backpedaling to correct. Providing information-hungry people with guesses is like feeding a starving person junk food: it may taste good, but it has no nutritional value and may make you sick.

## **A Formula for Sharing Information: Factual + Necessary = Sharable**

There will always be times when leaders don’t have all the information they want, yet they’re still expected to lead an organization toward an uncertain objective. It can be tempting to look for someone to blame, but if leaders own their challenges, they address obstacles where they can affect them: starting at their level.

This means sharing only information with high veracity (factual), and that only applies to that organization’s actions (necessary). Anything un-verified or irrelevant should be sifted out and discarded, like rumors, hearsay, or details that apply to someone else. But what happens when the trash is filtered out and there’s nothing left to share? Then you rely on “Ambiguity Tolerance.”

## **Building Ambiguity Tolerance into Organizational DNA**

Operational Security (OPSEC) or the restriction to release certain information are non-negotiable constraints that must be obeyed. This underscores the need to build “ambiguity tolerance” into an organization’s dynamic. If you can shape a culture long-term—like a unit

or staff section—this habit develops over time. You can try regularly using phrases like, “this is all the information that is *useful to us*,” or “that is not confirmed as factual,” to rumors. This is a subtle reminder that your team should demand high standards for information quality. You can also recognize and acknowledge the lack of information and then reinforce your team’s shared outlook that this is neither good nor bad, but it simply *is*.

### **Consistency in Application**

Whatever this looks like for your organization, being consistent in your approach is key so that patterns are congruent between what is said and what is done. That way when chaos ensues, habits are already hard-wired into your team. At first, there may be withdrawal symptoms, as we are used to having cheap information providing a steady stream of dopamine. But it is as simple as this: share only that which is factual and necessary, and embrace the unknown when that’s your only choice. Anything else is potentially harmful, not to mention frustrating.

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