

UNCOVERING TRUTHS

By Marilyn Thiet

Jeff Jones, the Chief Marketing Officer for Target Corporation recently posted a message on LinkedIn responding to people both inside and outside of the company who publically exposed flaws in the company and its culture. This exposure comes at a tough time for Target, right on the heels of a major data breach that shook the confidence of customers and following the departure of their CEO. While many leaders in Jeff Jones position would retreat inward and choose either silence or words of defense, Jeff took the very bold move of talking about the truth of what was said. He called the bold moves of the employees who posted the truths a gift. He admitted that while his first thought was it would have been better to handle the issues raised by the employees in private, that in the end the truth has set them free. He quoted French novelist Emile Zola, "If you shut up truth and bury it under the ground, it will but grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way."

Most likely we all have experienced a situation in which we were less than forthcoming about something only to have it blow up in our face. Yet like Jeff Jones, we know that the truth usually does set us free. It may hurt, it may be ugly, and it may take time, but acknowledging our true reality is really the only way to move forward in a positive direction.

In a client conversation with a CEO this week, we discussed a training program he wanted rolled out to his employees. The program was going to be a large corporate initiative, training hundreds of people on a new process. The price tag for this training was going to be quite high but the CEO was willing to pay it, for he knew the company had to change the way it was operating. Having worked for this client for several years, I knew a truth about this company that would doom the initiative from the start. Instead of offering the client what he wanted in a training proposal, I spoke of the truth. The initiative would never work because of their culture, one that lacks accountability. There it was, the elephant that is always in the room and never introduced. After I brought it up, there was a long pause of silence, during which I questioned if I had done the right thing, wondering how he would react and if I would still be working with this company in the future. When the CEO finally spoke, he thanked me and said he was relieved that the truth was out on the table. He has known this for a long time but hasn't spoken of it because he wasn't quite sure what to do about it. We then spent the remainder of the call talking about the steps we could take to transform the culture of complacency to one of accountability, a step that was critical to the company's survival.

What are the truths that you are burying about your company and culture? What are the things that as a leader you are afraid to dig into too deeply for fear of what you will find?

And what is at the root of that fear, the truth that you will uncover, or the fact that once you uncover and acknowledge it you will have to do something about it?

Jeff Jones is positive that the recent truths exposed at Target will in the end serve the company well. They will address the issues and move on, hopefully becoming stronger than ever. He admits this will be a difficult process and in his message to employees he invited those who don't believe they can recover or are too tired or cynical to make it work to leave. Another bold move in a time of company uncertainty. But if Target is to recover and prosper, now is the time for truth and bold moves. What bold but necessary moves are you going to make today to unleash your truths, confront your current reality, and grow your business?