

How Important Work Drives Truth

A field note on incentives, self-interest, and why the conversation keeps dying in the room.

I had a challenging offsite recently. The intent was to put a senior team in a discussion about incentives. I designed it that way because what an organization is, is a function of what it rewards, punishes, and tolerates. Every organization is already optimized to be exactly what it is. No amount of team-building, a new framework, or another assessment will change that as long as the current incentive structure stays in place. A discussion of incentives, and how they drive the behaviors you can already see, is not optional.

It is also one of the hardest conversations a team can have. You are asking them to admit they are a cause of the dysfunction they are trying to fix. That is a tough ask, especially when promotions and reputation are on the line.

If you are serious about change, you have to wade into that anyway. Hiding from it does no one any good.

This is the moment you see the team for what it is. When the stakes get high, you can watch in real time how they wrestle with the problem — or refuse to. Look for the factions that appear. Who does not talk is as instructive as who dominates. Look for who is protecting what. The awkward silences tell you as much as the speeches.

When you are facilitating in that environment, you can see the Lie Economy clearly. Silence and lying are the rational choices. Nothing good happens while everyone in the room is calculating how to protect something, promote something, whom to believe, or what to believe. The usual outcomes are kicking the can down the road and platitudes about putting it on the parking lot to deal with later.

Most organizations are like this. They cannot get alignment or forward motion because too many people are busy protecting themselves or promoting themselves. That is why a discussion about incentives is so difficult. It reveals all of that. But no one wants it revealed. The Lie Economy flourishes in ambiguity.

The Courage Economy is the opposite design. It is the attempt to make truth, curiosity, and debate the rational choices. It is the removal of ambiguity. It is shining the light so that people can see what is actually happening, name what needs to happen, and move forward.

And so we find ourselves at cross-purposes. Promotion requires a best face. It requires being the one who did the great thing. It requires making sure someone else does not get the credit, and that dissenting voices are diminished. The Will, as Schopenhauer put it, is strong. The truth has a hard time fighting that. Such is life in the corporate game.

The only mechanism I have found that short-circuits this is important work. Only when the work is truly and unequivocally important will people sublimate their interests to getting it done.

Seen this way, the dysfunction of a Lie Economy is not a moral failing. Self-interest is natural. The dysfunction is a work-design problem. The diagnosis is usually this — you are not doing work important enough that people will defer their self-interest to it. Or maybe you are, but no one believes you.

Every leader needs to be able to answer these questions:

What work are you doing that is important enough that people will defer their self-interest to the mission?

If you are not doing work of that importance — why not?

If you are, does anyone believe it?

If they do not — why not?

If you want to differentiate yourself in the market, you must have important work to do. Otherwise you are just keeping the trains running on time. And that has never been enough to get people to dedicate themselves to a mission.

Think about whether the work is actually that important. And if it is, whether you have done a good job of framing why.

Otherwise, when you sit a team down to talk about what you reward, punish, and tolerate, no truth will be spoken.