

Jim's Profit Accelerator 33: Are You Protecting Your Prophets?

No, this isn't church, but there is wisdom here, and it translates directly to doing business faster—and better. Here's the story. Every major religion has prophets, who have two jobs:

- Tell it as it is.
- Care for the people as they learn truth. (Technical note: Sometimes prophets predict the future, but our prophets don't.)

Every winning organization that I know of also has prophets, by another name. Those are folks at all levels who do these things regularly:

- Tell it as it is.
- Choose carefully what to disclose.
- Care for the people who struggle to deliver and hear the truth.

SPEED BUMP: Who are the prophets in your organization?

Healthy organizations and top leaders grow prophets instead of hoping they'll self-ignite. To grow your own prophet, find one or two people who want to learn these three skills:

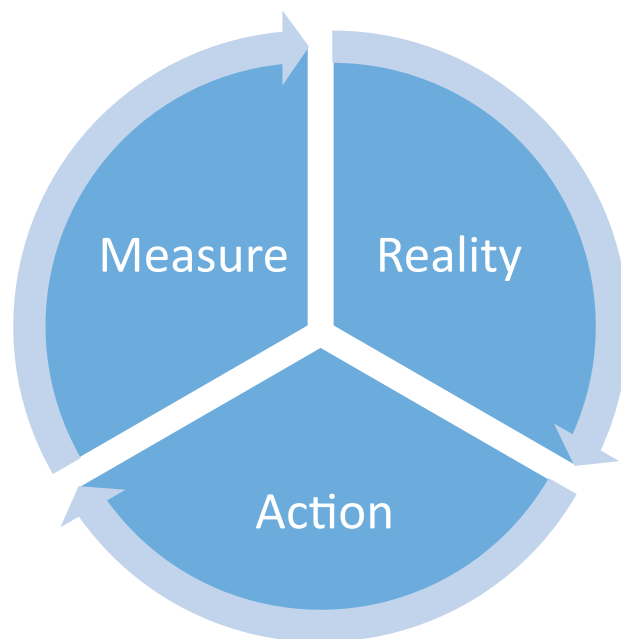
1. **Tell it as it is:** Dig out the data, and focus there. The data can be hard facts or soft judgments, but it's about data, not people. There are no "who" questions, other than to find ground zero to understand the facts better.
2. **Limit what to disclose:** A prophet's power comes from an acute sense of what matters to organization results. A data flood can strangle a great organization in days, unless that data is, pardon the expression, curated. The curation rule is simple: Pull in only data that leads directly to positive action. Store the rest for later, because it is potentially useful to solve a different puzzle.

There are three types of data, and different questions pertain to each.

- **Reality now**, disclosed with questions like these:
 - How do you know?
 - When did you discover it?
 - How often is it occurring?
 - Why does it matter?
- **Action**, clarified with questions like these:

- What data will we act on?
 - What can we do this week to minimize the damage?
 - What can we do this month to prevent a recurrence?
 - What education will expand the prevention team?
- **Progress Measures**, activated with questions like these:
 - What exactly will we measure?
 - How can we measure it reliably?
 - How can we get it to everyone daily?

SPEED BUMP: Acceleration comes with narrow data broadly understood and applied.



- 3. Care for the people** who struggle to deliver and hear the truth. Winning teams know that people will try (and risk failure) only when it's safe. The simple safety questions are:
- What exactly happened? (Not *what did you do?*)
 - What did you learn?
 - What can you do to prevent this next time?

But what about mistakes that people make? Isn't that data? Yes, and here's how to harness it: Assume the best motives of people until you are buried in overwhelming proof otherwise. Lazy leaders shake their heads over dumb moves their people make. Expert leaders go directly to the person to understand the inputs that caused the action. Here are examples of such inputs:

- "We've always done it that way."
- "I saw my team member get chewed out because he didn't do that."
- "No one told me the right way, and I knew we had to do something, so I did."

As one wag said, no one gets up in the morning and decides to foul up the people and processes at work (sociopaths excepted, and they are rare).

Where do I find these prophets? Every organization has them, in addition to the CEO. Ask every leader, including first-line supervisors, to name the prophet on his or her team. Then plan to gather them for a thirty-minute session with these objectives:

- Name them as prophets.
- Reinforce their critical importance to the success of everyone in the company.
- Ask them to write down who they will speak truth to.
- Publicize the prophet role publicly.
- Discuss ways of caring for the people caught doing it “wrong.”
- Charge each leader with calming the fear that these are moles who will rat on people.

You may think of prophets as loud and dominating, but that is not necessarily so. They are people who see things clearly and can make a dramatic difference with their sight. Larry was a fabricator (a master welder who can make complex pieces accurately without drawings). Larry disliked management so much that he worked alone, covered by his welding mask, on the graveyard shift. With expert nurturing he progressed to swing shift, to lead of a swing shift team, to swing shift supervisor, and then to assistant production manager of the day shift. Larry’s brilliance was not welding; it was the gift of seeing things as they were, saying out loud what he saw, and engaging people in a rapid solution. His power was in his sensitivity to people. He was always supportive, but never accepted malingering. Maybe that came from living alone with his crippled brother, whom he supported.

ACCELERANT: It’s game time: Do you know where your prophets are?

Call me.

For more information, visit www.grewco.com.

Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving businesses provide the foundation for his consulting work as president of the Grew Company. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights on his blog, BizBursts.com: <http://bizbursts.com/>. He holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University.

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