

## Silencing the dissenters can end your career

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In this newspaper last Thursday was a photograph to make British hearts swell with pride. Not because of the ornate horse-drawn carriage travelling to Buckingham Palace in glorious autumn sunshine - that was pretty shameful - but because of what was happening on the pavements.

In the carriage, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia stares fixedly ahead, attempting to ignore the fuss. His fellow passenger, Prince Charles, looks over his shoulder at the crowd protesting at allegedly corrupt dealings between the Saudis and the British arms company BAE Systems.

Roula Khalaf, our Middle East editor, reported that the Saudis were in "considerable shock" at the human rights and anti-corruption protests the king faced. Excellent.

Dissent is good for you. (We are talking about the peaceful, non-hate-filled variety here.) Not only does it make for more inventive, happier societies. Open discussion can also save governments and companies from mistakes - and if mistakes do happen, free debate can teach leaders how to avoid them in future.

If, unlike the Saudis, you are fortunate enough to live in a society where people are free to speak, it is foolish to ignore dissent's advantages.

But many do, in politics and in business. Gordon Brown's proposed reform of capital gains tax may or may not be a good thing. What is clear is that the consequences were not thought through.

The plans have upset creators of businesses, which was clearly not the intention. Had the UK premier's ministers put the changes out to consultation rather than hurriedly announcing them for short-term political advantage, they might have saved themselves a lot of trouble.

There is no excuse for surprising your political constituencies. If you put your ideas up for discussion, there are large numbers of lobby groups to tell you where you may be wrong. You cannot please them all; some will criticise you whatever you do. But at least you will know what you are up against.

Business is different. You still get into dreadful trouble for surprising the markets, but it is harder to canvass opinions. Even in democratic societies, businesses are not democracies. For employees, there are seldom career advantages in voicing dissent.

Subordinates who speak up are seen as awkward, difficult and lacking in team spirit. That is why it is so important that chief executives go in search of those who might save them from mistakes.

There is a striking feature to the two prominent corporate casualties of the past few days - Stan O'Neal, head of Merrill Lynch, and Chuck Prince of Citigroup: both were renowned for removing those executives who disagreed with them.

Mr Prince is reported to have become more authoritarian as the pressure told on him. Mr O'Neal was, by all accounts, always a loner.

Mr O'Neal was credited with having done good work at Merrill before the subprime mortgage crisis. He might have survived. The final straw was the news that he had made a merger approach to the rival bank Wachovia without consulting anyone. A colleague with the guts to speak up would have said to him: "You might want to run that past the board."

Encouraging discussion and tolerating dissent are among the most difficult parts of leadership. It is easy to become impatient with the talkers. What they have to say is sometimes impractical, too expensive or politically impossible.

Consultation also raises expectations that cannot be satisfied. When people say they want to be consulted, what they really mean is that they want you to do what they think. When the opposite happens, they often feel let down.

They may claim they were never really consulted at all, or that the discussion was bogus and that the chief executive had decided what to do in advance.

There are ways of mitigating this resentment, if not entirely avoiding it. If a leader encourages open discussion, collects disparate thoughts, summarises the various views and then explains why one is better than another, most people will accept that they have at least been heard.

The real reason leaders do not encourage open discussion is that it is uncomfortable. People who are new to top jobs may be too insecure to allow it.

Those who have held power for too long often become impatient with it. Dissent can seem like impertinence. "I run this company, not you," they may feel like telling the dissenters. The temptation to surround yourself only with those who never contradict you is strong.

But it is dangerous, as Mr O'Neal and Mr Prince found. If you are a leader, think back to your last few top-level meetings, or meetings with staff lower down the hierarchy. When you announced your plans and asked for questions, was there complete silence, or only fawning inquiries about small details? If so, trouble is probably just around the corner.

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