# Decision Depression

BY STEVE SIMPSON CSP

The more I work in organisations, the more I'm coming to the view that it's internal politics that play a major role in influencing people's performance.

Recently I ran a half-day seminar for around 130 emerging leaders in an organisation. During lunch, one of the delegates explained to me that she had recently taken on a leadership role in the organisation. She was stunned soon after taking on the role, which was in a part of the organisation in which she had previously not worked.

Apparently, employees in her department didn't take long to express their concerns about a number of issues. What shocked her was the fact that a large amount of their negative energy focused on an issue that literally happened **five or six years ago**. Since then, everything had changed other than these employees' fixation on these negatives.

**A Great Leader**
A long time ago, when I was a paid employee, I worked with a great leader. He was extremely intelligent, knowledgeable and aware of key organisational issues. I think his most important skill set however, related to his people skills.

When I worked with this leader, we were a very small team. So I got to know the leader's style and his thinking very well, including who he liked and disliked.

The thing that impressed me most was the leader's ability to treat everyone the same—whether or not he liked them. To put this another way, as an observer, you would never have been able to tell who this leader disliked, as everyone got treated well—he was personable, humorous and sociable.

Of course, this approach is in stark contrast to the team of people who were lamenting a bad decision that had happened six years prior.

Internal politics, in large part, is all about who people 'like' and it's also about getting influence over decisions. As a consequence of internal politics, factions emerge that create tensions between groups. And as soon as there are tensions between groups, the real risk is for trust to erode and for there to be less effective conversations.

In these contexts, decisions become issues about who *wins* and who *loses*. And if people suffer too many 'losses' then their discretionary effort evaporates. Most importantly, the negativity of these individuals and groups becomes highly communicable!

What we risk as managers therefore, is the possibility of creating negative factions from lack of meaningful conversations with people. This is highlighted in a 2004 study by Career Innovation (www.careerinnovation.com) titled *The Conversation Gap*.

The study backed by and involving member companies including The Boeing Company, BT Group, Deloitte, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, GlaxoSmithKline, Marriott International, Oxfam, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Toyota, UBS and Unilever, revealed fascinating insights into conversations between managers and employees.

Asked "Is there any topic you would like to raise with your manager at this time", a range of issues were identified, including:

- Development for the future (35% of respondents): "My career plan… and how to build up a network in this company globally"
- Future career opportunities (12%): "My future with the company, ie what roles I will/can do next"
- Financial rewards eg salary, pay progression, bonus (12%): "A wage increase in relation to my workload"
- Feedback on performance at work (9%): "I would like more day to day feedback on my performance"
- Clarity about what is expected of me (9%): "The need for more guidance and structure for my current role. The need for objective setting, and regular (monthly) discussions on my development and areas for improvement including strengths and weaknesses."

**What Stops You from Talking?**
When asked 'What's stopping you from raising this with your manager?', the top three responses were as follows:
- A lack of time and opportunity (25%): "Lack of quality time to have a face-to-face."
- Pressure of work (their own or their managers') (11%): "My manager is extremely busy and worried with operational subjects."
- Manager's lack of interest (8%): "I and am not getting what I consider to be a reasonable response."

There are personal and organisational issues that impact on the quality of conversation between managers and employees.

At a personal level, we need to ask ourselves how we respond to people when a decision goes against us. Do we bear a grudge (and hold it for six years!), or do we move on? In my work with organisations around the UGRs® (unwritten ground rules) concept, I've discovered that sometimes people hold a grudge unconsciously—that is, they retain and promote negatives about individuals or groups without realising it. This is particularly the case when people have been employed in the organisation for longer periods of time.

At an organisational level, we need to consider whether managers are encouraged and rewarded for having meaningful conversations with all their people—not just the 'in-crowd'. There is a very real risk of this not happening when leaders focus on the 'numbers' including financial data, performance targets and the like. And if quality conversations are not happening at the most senior level, there's a good chance they won't be happening elsewhere in the organisation!

It's something worth talking about.

## STEVE SIMPSON

**Steve Simpson is an author and international speaker based in Queensland. Creator of the globally acclaimed UGRs® concept, Steve has spoken at two World Conferences on Customer Service Management where he rated in the top 10 speakers. Last year he was invited to speak in seven countries including the US, UK, South Africa and India.**

**Contact details are:**
**Phone +617 5530 1465 Fax +617 5530 1295**
**Web www.keystone-management.com**
**Email steve@keystone-management.com**

**LEADING CHANGE**