



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



WORK MATTERS COLUMN

March 2022

Masques, Ostriches and the Role of Listening

-Part One

If we were hoping for a keenness of thought, a measure of intellectual acuity of the kind associated with 20/20 vision, 2020 surely did a number on us—and it wasn't the Powerball. What we received instead, was a cover-up of sorts that blanketed the entire world. That 'blanket' mandate to cover mouth and nose is still with us, though now it has morphed into something alien to life and living. Masks of any kind—whether spelled using its French variant or the more common 'mask'—are designed to hide, even as they protect. There is no denying the presence of masque-wearers in every society, and their presence can be justified. Then there are the ostriches. The two groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive and because of this, dynamics of human interaction can pose a challenge. Masque wearers present an image of self, and by so doing they present their notion of a preferred self. That's hiding. Ostriches also hide; they choose to bury their heads thinking that danger is either absent or averted by that action—if legend is to be believed. Both behaviours are barriers to communication. Workplace masqueraders and ostriches must be engaged, and in a way that legitimizes listening.

News around the world has quadrupled in intensity, moving from dire to despairing. To pretend that folks are ok is indeed to live out an ostrich-like existence and to masque our shamefacedness for so thinking. Sometimes we need to step away from the carnival that forces us to portray a single story of us. Only in so doing would we be able to move beyond a noisy hearing, to a level where we can actively listen, not only to what is happening around us, but more importantly to the people in our sphere, in our 'pods', and in our workplace. That kind of listening engenders trust, leading to a special kind of openness that informs without *mauvaise langue* and misunderstanding.

We have all, at one time or another, observed people operating from a place of denial, pretending that what is, is not. Perhaps worse is when we stand guilty, adopting the ostrich effect of avoidance. I called this kind of behavior "The Ostrich Effect" long before I

knew that it was indeed a term that describes a cognitive bias that we tend to assume, often to avoid negative information—including feedback—that could help us to monitor ourselves. Self-monitoring also includes being aware of those who travel the paths we do. That behavior is similar to the position driving experts caution us to assume when we are warned to drive not only for ourselves but for the other motorists.

In between the day we are born and the day we depart there is life and work. Life is what we make it, clichéd as it sounds; work, on the other hand, tends to be viewed in a different and oftentimes dimmer light. On the one hand, there is the "boss"; on the other, the "worker". The dimmer light casts shadows of mistrust, and because of mistrust, masques are donned. The workplace then becomes a place of pressure, real or imagined. Coupled with a world in turmoil, people—employers and employees—are feeling a kind of pressure never before experienced. But self-inflicted or not, "pressure does buss pipe". And where two or three are gathered for whatever reason, calamity can occur when pipes break.

Pipe-breaks in the workplace causing floods need to be avoided. A good starting point might be communication that is less about speaking and writing than it is about listening. That kind of engagement allows a leaning-in to empathize. And while the busyness of today's world has increased, it would be foolhardy to ignore engagement that allows for another story to be told. In the telling of that story, perhaps a more accurate picture might be painted.

Fortunately, this country has not seen life-ending tragedies of the magnitude witnessed around the world. However, there are other lingering, insidious and malevolent behaviours displayed in and out of the workplace that have gone unattended. Both employer and employee treat with such behaviours in ways that either best suit their personality or their inclination. Seldom might reason factor, if at all; far less, listening. What does occur almost instinctively, however, is the re-adjusting or the donning of masques that hide true feelings: What ah

really wa' say tuh yuh ah cyar! Or for the timider, Le' meh bury meh head in d sand, eh. Dis place eh mine. Masque-wearers and ostriches do little for workplace growth and productivity. In this regard, approaches to communication may need to be revisited periodically in the same way that other processes are treated. This is where communication that considers the psychology of the skill of listening must feature front and center.

Michele Clavery M. Ed.
Head Continuing Studies