

Stuff It: Truth-Telling for Caregivers
Linda Lehman-Murphy
HeartSong Retreats: Care for Caregivers™

Have you ever thought what it would be like to be a part of a family or a care team that operates entirely by telling truth? Initially, it sounds impossible, even ludicrous. As a society, we're not trained to be really truthful in our lives. Instead, in varying degrees, we are trained to be politically correct. We are trained to say the 'right' thing, whatever each of us determines that to be. Most of us have been taught that we should not hurt others' feelings. And we wonder what others would think of us if they knew the real person rather than the image we project out there. Why would we want to upset the apple cart when we are getting by just fine? We can come up with hundreds of perceived barriers to living and working in an environment of truth. And we continue to stuff it.

But consider what could be gained by creating an open environment where there are agreed-upon values and agreed-upon ways to communicate our truths. Imagine a place of safety where expression of our truth did not put us at risk for losing a feeling of belonging, or losing respect (of self or others), or even losing a job. Imagine what it would be like to work (and yes, family caregiving is work) in a place in which there are congruent mission, purpose and values. It's the difference between holding your breath and breathing freely.

There is the question of truth itself. What is that? We all experience truth in our own way and with our own definitions. Now, that adds another complication. First, we really are a bit afraid to tell it; then, we don't all agree on what it is, after all! Rather than creating more of a dilemma, however, this issue of agreement begins to give clues about where to begin.

In a recent television home makeover series, the team of workers goes into a home, evaluates what is needed most by the resident family, and then creates a new environment in which to live. In the discussions with the family, each person talks about what they most want. And then they talk together about what they all want in common. From that point, they participate in the redesign of their environment. The same thing can be done in a family or a work place, including a care team like yours. As you and your team begin to work on a Truth Makeover, that simple model of agreement, consensus, and respectful collaboration can be a guide. Sometimes there will be just a few tweaks made to get to the desired environment; sometimes there is a major scraping of the old and replacing with the new. In either case, and in all those situations between, there must be respect for the ideas and needs of each individual, and consensus about what is good for the collective.

What can a family caregiver do to create an environment of truth telling? Most of us are dealing with all the 'usual' dynamics of our families. To add the ever-changing roles of caregivers and care recipients (often role reversal) can seem to be a daunting challenge. Someone must set the tone; someone must insist on a loving environment of openness. And someone must be consistent in creating this communication. Too often, this is just too much, too different – or so we believe. In your family situation, what would it take to create an open and truthful environment? Is it possible to create a care team to help provide support and assistance for the caregiver and a warm and loving and nurturing experience for both the care recipient and the caregiver? Is it possible that the caregiver can find support from others? Although it may seem to be just too much to take on, consider the possibilities and the amazing benefits of creating this loving environment. Start by looking for a care team that can be a part of this change, and who will be supportive of the caregiver and the care recipient as the inevitable life transitions progress. Find those individuals who understand the need for openness and honesty and who will help you create this truthful and loving environment. And then, let them help.

In a work environment, this is an endeavor that must be conceived and created from the top. For years, we thought that self-directed teams with no official leader would work. On rare occasions they did. Most often they did not. This work requires strong and committed leadership from the top. And it requires strong and committed followership from the team. In order for this change to a more productive and congruent workplace to occur, you must either Be a Leader, Become a Leader, or Find a Leader. There is absolutely no way around it. And like the family caregivers, there can be no half-way commitment, no wishy-washy approach, no dropping the ball, no playing small. That's the truth. So for those who make this choice and who are committed to playing full out, here's how to begin.

First, whether you are the family caregiver (believe it or not, you are the leader here), or the leader of a caregiver organization (or have found, or are still looking for) a leader, be absolutely certain of your own mission, purpose, and values. Most of us simply slide through life. We go from day-to-day with just a general idea of what we are here for. But a general idea will just get you a general outcome. In order to get what we want, we have to know what that is. That seems quite obvious, but many of us have never thought that we could even ask for what we want. Now is the time to start asking. Living our Truth and being 'on purpose' is an amazing place to be. By reflecting on why you are here, and then connecting with how you can act that out in this life, you can experience the difference between just existing and really living. Until you try it, you won't know the difference. That is for you to seek and for you to find. And once this amazing place is found, you will be in a joyful place of living full-out. I imagine that many professional caregivers have come close to truly living their purpose. This calling, this profession has elements of service that many do not; for that we are extremely fortunate. Now, if you know that this truly is the way to share your purpose in life, venture on to design the delivery of that purpose. And for both family and professional caregivers, if you discover that this is not the way to share your purpose, find another way. That's the truth.

Then, find a place or create one where there are others who are on a similar path. This step is usually the one where we have some changes to make. If you are the leader in an organization or a family caregiver creating a care team, it is time to make some assessments about whom and what matches the mission, purpose and values that you hold and that you desire in your place of "purpose delivery." These are not just mumbo-jumbo platitudes. This is real life and real work. This is where knowing about the *Rule Book for Living* is important.

Each of us has rules for living that we have adopted along the path of our life. These rules often have less to do with our purpose and mission than they have to do with how we are programmed. You will find that when your mission, purpose and values are clear, your rules for living (and working – same thing) that support them must be congruent. So in your personal life and in your work life, it is time to pull out your rule book and assess each one. Determine what rules you live by right now and whether you want to Keep or Toss them. Some rules are totally congruent with your purpose – so keep them. Some rules just don't fit – so toss them. We have a choice here. If your decision is to live in a truthful and open way, both personally and professionally, this is another guide as you examine each rule. Here's an example. One of the rules many of us have is that we cannot (or should not) ask for assistance. For many, this came from our well-intended independent parents and grandparents who wanted us to be self-sufficient (read: survive). Now there's a value that we get to evaluate. Yes, we want to be self-sufficient sometimes, but what does that do for us in a work environment where we can provide exponential service improvement when we have some help? This "always" rule can be tossed or changed to fit the way we know best to provide service. Perhaps the new rule could be to honor the skills of the others on the team and use them to their best advantage. This rule is congruent with your mission and with your chosen way to deliver that mission. By now, I'm sure that you know that your values, beliefs and your rules that support them are your Truth. For most of us, these things change throughout our lives as we grow in our understanding and experience.

Now we know that our rules can and usually do change through our lives, and that we can write our rule books in any way we please. In other words, we can choose our ways of being, living and working – our Truth. How do you apply this in your caregiving life? Each member of the care team has the ongoing responsibility to assess their personal rules, truthfully. Concurrently make a similar ongoing assessment of team rules, and create the choices and changes of those rules for the team. It is imperative that the leader establish a safe truth-telling environment, especially as they express the mission and values, and guide the collective choices of the rules that will keep the team on purpose. To formalize the commitment, one (or many) of the rules could focus on truth-telling. Because most of this work is done in existing organizations, families or care teams in 'makeover' fashion, there will be some folks who discover they just don't fit. And there will be some whom the leaders discover just don't fit. Strong leaders will be honest with themselves and with those others and will find ways to help them make changes to places where they do fit. Not everyone will have similar values and adopt the new rules. That's the truth. You must tell it and live it.

The good news is that from that conscious point on, 'hiring' can be done in a way that brings people who fit the mission and values of your team. As that mission is expressed in the selection process, the people who don't fit (read: whose rules / Truth are different) will self-select out – or you can thank them and send them on their way. It's not that they are 'wrong' for the job; it's that they just don't fit here. The best way to create the congruent and productive care team you want is to know what you want and to choose well. Make-do, gap-filling and not-quite-right are not acceptable. As this new environment of breathing grows, the trust that develops among the team

members helps to confirm that truth-telling is safe. And the truth telling will occur more and the benefits of the open sharing and honesty will help to provide better service to you and to your care recipients. This is an ever-ascending spiral of being. It requires unwavering commitment to the mission and to the common rules. It requires strong leadership and strong followership.

To the leaders: Be consistent, tell the truth, live the mission, be on purpose, constantly evaluate the rules for consistency with the mission and values. Be grateful and humble. Your team members are watching to see if you really mean business. To the followers: Be consistent, tell the truth, live the mission, be on purpose, constantly evaluate the rules for consistency with the mission and values. Your leaders and your colleagues are watching to see if you really mean business. This is a delicious and honorable place to be, for everyone.