

Leading Ways: FEEDBACK

Most of us want to improve the quality and efficiency of our work and central to this improvement is receiving feedback. If you are a manager or leader you are in the crucial position of providing this, but you need help to do so effectively. The person you are working with needs the basic skills and ambition needed to advance in the organization. And the organization itself needs to value this improvement and provide the structures to advance the individual's effort, such as annual reviews, promotion opportunities and appreciation.

The role of the supervisor however is crucial and is often needed to make up for shortcomings in the individual or the organization. Let's explore how we can foster this crucial skill set, as well as the environment needed to receive it. .

CREATING A POSITIVE FEEDBACK ENVIRONMENT

Long before specific feedback is given it is helpful for managers and leaders to work toward the creation of a positive feedback environment. Such an environment creates the shared expectation that everyone involved is on the team and the team has a shared goal, values, culture and expectations. The leader is the principal coach in establishing such an environment, but when it is successful, everyone is coaching everyone else, offering supportive and appreciative comments and, when needed, helping think through how to improve the situation or address a problem.

Creating such an environment requires continuous action by the leader until the team can make the culture belong to them. Here are five elements that are important to such a culture:

CLEAR PURPOSE AND COMMON GROUND

All teams and work groups need this as the first step. Without both elements, they can't answer basic questions such as "Where are we going?" and "What is in this for me?" or "How will success be measured?" It is the leader's job to facilitate this conversation and keep it going forward as new things arise and situations change.

ACCEPTANCE OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL

Most people come to new ventures with some anxiety about acceptance and performance. Some of this is constructive and produces effort, but it is important for the team leader to create an environment of acceptance and trust. Otherwise it will be difficult to coach in a situation without it seeming judgmental at the personal level. This leads to defensiveness, cover-ups, and emotional outbursts, as the feedback seems more personal than professional. The ideal place to be is, "We are in this together and it is in all of our interests to address the problem."

TWO-WAY NATURE OF MOST SITUATIONS

Almost every situation and dynamic that becomes problematic and requires feedback has two sides. Unfortunately, most of the two sides discussions we have are focused on fixing the blame on one

side or the other. The famous ‘he said-she said’ dynamic. There are situations where one person or group has acted in a unilateral and conscious manner to be dishonest or harm another or subvert a process, and these should be dealt with accordingly. However, for the vast majority of problems the two-sides perspective points to the reality that each side has contributed something to the situation and these elements need to be teased out and addressed.

EXPECTATION OF IMPROVEMENT

Every person on the team, including the leader, must go into the situation with the expectation that a better job can always be done and that is only possible if everyone is helping everyone else to improve. This means feedback goes in all directions.

SANCTIONS ON THOSE WHO REMAIN OUTSIDE

Nothing will kill a feedback culture faster than a rogue individual who is left to create discord. This does not mean everyone has to agree, far from it. It does mean that individual behaviors that are inconsistent with a constructive feedback culture- unwillingness to share in feedback, vindictiveness when feedback is given, using feedback to make personal attacks -are addressed immediately. Without such attention from the leader all of the other efforts to create a culture will be for naught, worse they will seem hypocritical and bring out cynicism in others.

GIVING FEEDBACK

Remember, a constructive feedback culture goes both ways. So, learning how to both give and receive feedback is essential. If the culture and environment is set up well, then receiving feedback should come easy and naturally. The most important thing here is to model and instill the behaviors that you wish your direct reports to share, and try to be grateful for the opportunity to improve.

Giving feedback is a big part of this modeling and, like most things, takes a bit of practice to get good at. Here are some general rules to keep in mind when giving feedback:

BE CONFIDENTIAL

Feedback is always given in private and it is a conversation between you and the person receiving the feedback. Do not bring a lot of other people into this conversation by representing their feelings or attitudes.

BE SUPPORTIVE

The point of the feedback is improvement so that the person receiving it can improve and be successful in a work setting. Being non-judgmental is a major part of this. Be encouraging and non-threatening. Attacking in any way will just make the person you want to influence defensive, resentful and likely to not hear any of the things you want to say.

BE CLEAR

If it is important to offer feedback, then it is important to be clear about what you want to say. Here are some steps to clarity:

- Think about it beforehand
- Share it with another person, someone totally outside of the work setting
- Question your own motivations in giving the feedback
- Imagine what the outcome is you would like

BE TIMELY

Nothing is worse than waiting until the annual review to give feedback on something that was important but happened six months ago. While it is important to be timely, it is also wise to remember to give yourself some time to cool off if the item of feedback you want to share has brought out an emotional response in you.

SPEAK FROM A NON-EMOTIONAL AND CARING SPACE

This may be the most challenging element in giving feedback, but it is essential. If you are still “steaming” about something, you have to regain your composure before you engage in feedback, nothing constructive will be gained and there is the real potential for damage, wasted time or even bigger problems. Step away, wait a day, cool down, think about it and what you want to achieve, but then have the courage to re-engage.

FOCUS ON SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS OR SITUATIONS

General feedback is generally a fuzz ball when the feedback giver is uncomfortable with what needs to be said. Just say it, a clear and short non-judgmental message opens the door for a conversation to solve the problem. Anything else opens the door to lack of clarity, emotional response and inappropriate escalation of the significance of the problem.

DESCRIBE, DON'T JUDGE

Your job is to raise the issue and broaden the understanding. If you have already decided what caused the problem and what needs to be done, then you are not giving feedback, you are passing judgment. This is where the famous “I” statements can help. You don’t give up your opinion or what you have observed, but you are signaling that it is only one perspective and you are inviting them in to share their view. Remember to not generalize or make absolutist statements such as “You always do that.” Don’t make a simple situation worse by overreacting.

DIRECT TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR

Observing that someone might be smarter about something is not really helpful feedback. Observing that they were quick in making a judgment and reacting and that others and you seemed to be offended by this action is an observation they can consider and perhaps do something about.

DON'T LEAD WITH ADVICE

Feedback is not advice giving. It is sharing observations about a situation. After that is understood and valued, then it is possible to guardedly offer advice. In a constructive feedback culture the advice is generally asked for right away. A helpful question for the feedback giver at the outset of feedback is, “Are you getting the results you want from this approach?” Let the other person answer and then quite naturally ask if there are alternatives.

CHECK IT, BRIEFLY

It is quite all right to check to see if the feedback is understood but do so briefly. After two checks the questioning becomes abusive as in “What part of this *don't* you understand.”

Remember that constructive feedback is always given to help the individual who is receiving it. The more the feedback comes across as supportive and helpful, then the more successful it will be. This does not mean that continued inattention does not require more specific requests for change from the manager, leader or co-worker. But such a response should always be reserved until needed.

A WORK ON REVIEWS

Annual reviews are an important opportunity to look at the big picture from the past year and to do some planning for the coming year. They should stay at this level, except when specific goals for past years are assessed mutually and those for the coming year are set. The annual review is not a good time for feedback. If it was important in June, it should have been given at the time, not in March when the annual reviews are held. A development plan has some of the annual review and goal setting of an annual review but is more focused on personal professional growth and should become a way for activity and reinforcement to be shaped throughout the year.

Feedback, Annual Review and Development Planning

	Time Frame	Focus	Context	Perspective	Outcome
Feedback	Immediate	On a specific behavior or incident	Informal, don't elevate the significance	In the moment	Improved understanding of a particular incident.
Annual Review	Annual or at regular intervals, such as quarterly	On the bigger picture annual progress against goals and 360 input from others	Formal, set aside an hour for annual reviews and half an hour for check-ins	Reflects back on past work and forward to future work and change	Evaluation of the past year in terms of overall performance and outcomes and a plan for personal and professional activity in the coming year.
Development Plan	Annual, at regular intervals, and reinforced continually	On the bigger picture of personal and professional development and growth for coming year	Formal as above, but continuous throughout the year	Assess professional and personal development goals in near- and longer-term future	Clarity about general direction desired of growth and specific plans to achieve it in the coming year

Bibliography

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