Managing People

What Good Feedback Really Looks Like

by Craig Chappelow and Cindy McCauley

May 13, 2019

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Summary.   Feedback — both positive and negative — is essential to helping managers enhance their best qualities and address their worst so they can excel at leading. Strengths-based development can, unfortunately, lull people into believing there are no areas in which they need to improve....   **more**

According to a recent Harvard Business Review cover story, it's rarely useful to give feedback to colleagues. The authors argue that constructive criticism won't help people excel and that, when you highlight someone's shortcomings, you actually hinder their learning. They say that managers should encourage employees to worry less about their weaknesses and instead focus on their strengths.

Our research and experience at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) lead us to a different conclusion: Feedback — both positive and negative — is essential to helping managers enhance their best qualities and address their worst so they can excel at leading.

There are several ideas in the article with which we agree:

- **Harsh feedback does not help people thrive and excel.** Indeed, effective criticism needs to be delivered with respect and care. Frequent or exclusively negative comments can spark defensive reactions that cloud perceptions and dampen motivation.
- **Positive feedback is critical for learning**. People are often quick to notice what's wrong, but it's equally important to pay attention to and provide input on what is working to support development.
- **Telling someone how to fix a problem is often the wrong approach.** You'll foster more learning by asking questions that stimulate reflection and coaching people into exploration and experimentation.

However, we disagree with other points:

- **People are unreliable assessors of others and thus give feedback that is more distortion than truth.** Feedback is never purely objective since it is delivered from a human being with a unique perspective. However, for a leader, knowing how others see and experience her is incredibly valuable since those people make decisions based on their perceptions—decisions about who to listen to, cooperate with, trust, support and promote.
- **Feedback about weaknesses creates a threat that inhibits learning.** Research indicates that 360-feedback recipients who get unfavorable ratings tend to improve their performance *more than* others. And, in CCL's work, we've found successful executives credit all types of potentially threatening events (e.g., horrible bosses, making a business mistake, being demoted, and firing employees) as key drivers of their development.
- **People should just focus on their strengths.** Our work has shown that ignoring one's weaknesses is one of the greatest contributors to individual derailment in organizations. No matter how well-tuned a leader's strengths are, one unaddressed "fatal flaw" (e.g., arrogance, inability to build a team or difficulty adapting to a new context) can lead to failure — particularly if it is unacknowledged by the individual.
- **You can best help your organization by getting better at the things you are already good at.** This assumes that everyone is already good at the right things — that they have the critical skills and competencies that organizations need to succeed. Our colleague Jean Leslie's research demonstrates that this is rarely the case. In fact, she found that leaders are weakest in the four most important future leadership skills—inspiring commitment, leading employees, strategic planning and change management.

When you focus only on strengths, you lull people into believing there are no areas in which they need to improve. It also lets managers off the hook for fostering necessary — and sometimes difficult — development in their reports and co-workers, which ultimately compromise organizational effectiveness.

So, instead of encouraging people to avoid negative feedback, we should focus on how to deliver negative feedback in ways that minimize the threat response. At CCL, we teach an approach to delivering feedback called Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) to address both strengths and weaknesses in a clear, specific, professional and caring way.

Feedback providers first note the time and place in which a behavior occurred. Then they describe the behavior — what they saw and heard. The final step is to describe the impact the behavior had in terms of the feedback providers' thoughts, feelings or actions.

Here's an example: "In our staff meeting this morning when we were discussing strategies for funding the new initiative, you interrupted Jessica while she was talking and said, "That idea will never work," before she had a chance to finish. This left me feeling disappointed I didn't get to hear more from her, and I was intimidated about sharing my ideas with the group."

Such feedback is not judgmental ("You were wrong to interrupt Jessica"), not generalized ("You are always interrupting people") and doesn't analyze the reasons the individual behaved as he did ("Do you have no respect for other people's ideas?"). As a result, it is more likely to be heard and considered rather than defensively rejected.

By all means, we encourage organizations, managers, and employees to recognize and leverage strengths. But you ignore weaknesses at your own peril.

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