Take the Fear Out of Feedback

Mention the word "feedback" and most people jump to the conclusion that they're about to experience something uncomfortable or negative. But imagine a world without feedback—we would cease to learn, grow, and improve ourselves, our performance, our behavior, and our lives. Yet most of us resist giving and getting feedback because we fail to see the upside.

Research from The Ken Blanchard Companies® indicates that the three main reasons people resist giving feedback are:

- They're fearful the other person will get angry
- They've tried before and didn't get results
- They're not sure how to do it effectively

Giving feedback appropriately is a powerful skill. And it is a skill everyone needs to master—especially in the business world, where delivering feedback can make a marked difference in performance. The good news is it is a skill and can be learned.

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Three Kinds of Feedback

Pure Feedback—nonjudgmental, descriptive information about past performance or behavior that enables improvement

Personalized Feedback—Judgmental information that could be both positive or negative about past performance or behavior designed to encourage or extinguish future behavior

Poor Feedback—Nonspecific evaluative information about performance that creates defensiveness rather than an increase in competence or commitment

When and How to Give Feedback

There are several guidelines when giving feedback. First, focus on the behavior, not on traits or personality. You can modify behavior but you can't always modify traits or personality. Secondly, be descriptive and specific. Think of the rules of journalism: provide the "how, what, and why" and gather your facts so your feedback will be relevant and worth listening to. The receiver may discount feedback if it's not verifiable. Specific and descriptive feedback is verifiable and therefore more impactful, credible, and unbiased.

Third, give feedback immediately if possible. A common leadership mistake is to save up feedback for an upcoming performance meeting or review, which may make the feedback irrelevant, especially if the behavior occurred so far back in the past that it's no longer an issue.

Fourth, it's important to control the context. Make sure the setting is neutral and private. Keep your emotions in check and stay calm. Be aware of your body language, which can communicate volumes.

Finally, make the feedback relevant and about moving forward. Giving feedback about behaviors that are unlikely to reoccur can damage trust, so make sure you keep the feedback current. And if you don't feel you can control your emotions, either wait for them to subside or keep your feedback to yourself.

The Role of Feedback in Developing People

In order to keep people focused and productive it's important to provide the day-to-day coaching, support, and resources people need to achieve the goals that have been set. Managers need to get in the habit of giving constant feedback. And it's important that it be provided in a timely manner, especially in cases where you are trying to correct behavior.

When preparing to deliver feedback you must consider your relationship with the individual, when and how to provide the feedback, your motives in the situation, and how clear the goal was.

When giving feedback its important to keep the judgment and the blame out of it. The key is to come at the question of feedback with the mindset that people have the best intentions and are doing the best that they can given the information, skills, and competencies that they have at their disposal. Never blame the person. Instead, focus on the behavior.

Employees need specific and descriptive feedback if they are going to master a skill or achieve a goal. But this type of one-to-one feedback is in short supply in most organizations. The reason is two-fold. First, managers avoid giving feedback because they do not have a clear process to follow, and second, they are concerned that without such a process the conversation might be perceived as evaluative and judgmental. The result is hesitation on the part of the manager that results in the feedback session never occurring.

The opportunity loss can tremendous. Research indicates that if someone does not get feedback, they are not going to grow. If they get feedback that is ill-delivered or ill-defined, then their performance may decline. The only way to see a dependable increase in performance is when a person receives well-crafted, targeted feedback in a timely fashion.

To provide effective feedback, leaders must learn, develop, and cultivate very specific conversational skills. Managers—or anyone trying to help develop another person's skills—must appreciate the importance of effective feedback; understand their personal motives, agenda, and responsibility for giving feedback; and know when and how to give the various types of feedback.

Start with Some Self-Examination

Managers looking to improve their feedback skills should starting with a couple of self-directed questions. Many managers get off on the wrong foot because they focus more on their own needs than the needs of the person receiving the feedback.

Sadly, feedback is often based on our own need to be seen as an expert or to control the environment. To address this, managers must ask themselves, "Is this my need to give this feedback or am I giving this feedback because the other person's performance will actually benefit as a result of it?"

If it's the former, managers should resist the need to give feedback. Start with understanding your role with the individual. Whether it is your spouse, your child, someone you manage, a coworker, or a peer, ask yourself, 'What is my role here? What context am I in? Is it appropriate for me to give feedback? If it is appropriate, what is my purpose?"

Match the Feedback to the Desired Outcomes

Once a manager is clear on the purpose of the feedback, the next step is to provide the type of feedback that will best meet the needs of the recipient. As mentioned, there are three main types of feedback—all can work well, as long as they are matched correctly to the needs of the employee.

Personalized feedback is the type that most managers are familiar with. This is judgmental information (either positive or negative) about past performance designed to encourage or extinguish future behavior. It takes the form of either praise, when used to recognize positive behavior, or re-direction, when used to discourage negative behavior.

Pure feedback is a new concept for most managers. It is feedback that is descriptive, objective, factual, and nonjudgmental. This kind of feedback allows the receiver to decide what to do with it. It is most appropriate when the goal of a manager is to develop an independent person who can judge for themselves how they are doing—to give themselves feedback.

Poor feedback should be avoided at all costs because it creates defensiveness rather than a commitment to improved performance or behavior change. Make sure to provide feedback that is backed by fact. Stay out of judgment and be prepared to talk about your expectations, accountability, and support.

The Art of Listening

Feedback should be viewed as a gift. When someone gives you feedback, listen with the mindset that they're trying to help you improve and they've taken the time to share their opinions. In order to do this, both leaders and direct reports must master the art of listening.