

leadership instalments

Building a Feedback Relationship

By Dan Gaynor

ASK MOST PEOPLE IF THEY RECEIVE AS MUCH FEEDBACK AS THEY would like from the man or woman they work for and the vast majority will reply they do not. This does not always mean they work for poor leaders, it simply means their relationship with the boss is important and they want and need to know where they stand.

All effective leaders have great feedback habits and yet this is an area where there is often lots of room for improvement. Employees who ask for more feedback are often told, "If you're not hearing anything from me you're doing just fine." If you've ever said this, I'm sorry but it just doesn't cut it, it may be somewhat reassuring but people don't learn anything from it. Effective feedback helps people learn from both their successes and their shortcomings; it is frequent, specific and timely. If you're not providing feedback to at least someone each day and regularly to each person who reports to you, your falling far short of what is needed, and you are missing a great team building opportunity. I'm not talking about lengthy meetings or performance reviews, just a 3-5 minute reflection on something that went well or poorly, accompanied by a little coaching. Through these brief encounters receivers learn more about their job description, their performance and the best ways to improve, by either remedying problems or building on successes.

Now back to the crux of the problem. My experience with both leaders and followers has convinced me that the way they feel about feedback is something of a two bladed sword. Most followers will say they would like more feedback, and most when they are honest will also say they are a little nervous about receiving it. Most leaders know they should provide more feedback, and when they are honest, admit to being a little nervous about providing it. Both end up stalled on an important developmental tool.

The best way to overcome this is to talk up front about the feedback relationship: what it's all about, why it is so essential and what to



expect in the early days. I like to help people see how vital it is to their development and that I'm providing it to help them become even more successful. I describe it as an important facet of our relationship and I declare that my intention in providing it is to help them learn. I acknowledge that they may be a little anxious about it at first and that this is normal, then I help them see that with time and experience this will pass.

When the leader is providing feedback in a sincere and constructive effort to help someone else learn - and not to vent his or her frustrations - the anxiety eventually fades and the receiver is able to better focus on the content. When I meet with resistance or people personalize the feedback I pause to re-iterate the spirit in which I'm offering it and I ask them to receive it in the same constructive spirit. With most people feedback becomes a normal part of the leader / follower relationship, then it becomes even more powerful.

Great teams are built one person, one situation at a time. Effective leaders look for feedback opportunities, they don't avoid them. Putting the effort in to make regular feedback a key facet of your team's culture - your way of life - is well worth the effort.

Discussion Questions:

1. How often are you providing feedback today?
2. In which of these qualities can you most improve the quality of your feedback: making it more frequent, specific, or timely?
3. If asked how you see their work, would your employees be able to provide a good answer?

To go deeper on feedback skills why not contact us about a half-day workshop.

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