

Leadership instalments

FEEDBACK IN THE FISHBOWL

By Dan Gaynor

DEVELOPING GREAT FEEDBACK HABITS IS VITAL

to every successful leader, from supervisors to presidents. In fact, high quality feedback that builds others up, even in the toughest circumstances, is so important that I describe it as the DNA of team development. While feedback serves at least seven important roles in team development, I'm going to focus today on one I call the "Fishbowl Effect."

From time to time every caring leader has to fire someone because it is best for the team and the individual. These decisions can either build or break teams. They happen very publicly, in a "fishbowl" with everyone else watching, and their perception of fairness is critical. This is when the leader's feedback habits become important.

If the leader has provided lots of the right feedback to everyone on the team they are likely to believe that the person who was fired also got lots of it – and a chance to improve. The encouraging feedback successful employees have received gives them the confidence to know they are valued team members. They are much less likely to be unsettled by the dismissal. If the leader has provided little or no feedback, or poor feedback, these same people may be quite shaken. They'll wonder how much opportunity the individual was given to change. They will question the fairness of it all and will wonder how they would be treated under similar circumstances. Even some of the most capable team members will feel insecure.

This is one reason every employee, not just those performing poorly, must get regular high quality feedback. They should get lots of encouragement when they earn it and correction when they need it. The feedback that takes place before a dismissal is much more important than what takes place after it.

As Director of Sales at our head office, I led a project to turn around a struggling advertising department at one of our larger newspapers. Many employees had become complacent and unproductive and the situation caught the attention of head office. It was my job to turn things around.

I began by teaching the local management team feedback skills. They

started working more closely with employees to encourage the right behaviours and correct the wrong ones. Some responded well, others as is always the case responded poorly. The feedback and the closer relationships that followed it helped us determine who had earned a place on the team and who had to leave. Everyone had an opportunity to make changes where they were necessary.

A couple of months later, we made a clean break with about a dozen employees on a single morning, and then we called the team together to talk about what had taken place. Even though a number of people lost their jobs that day, feedback gave those who remained confidence in their futures.

Employees usually know more quickly than their leaders about who is and is not performing. Provided the leader treats everyone fairly – and feedback is essential to fairness – they usually affirm our decisions. We carefully recruited a group of new people to fill out the team and the department took a big turn in the right direction. We can only hope those who moved on learned important lessons. Feedback played the critical role in the turnaround.

Dan Gaynor

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. The last time someone was fired in your organization how did others see the dismissal? Did they believe the individual was treated fairly?**
- 2. Would you say you receive as much feedback as you would like from the leader you work for?**
- 3. What would your employees say about the amount and quality of the feedback they receive?**

For more on how to provide the right kind of teambuilding feedback contacts us for a workshop.

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