

# The Art of Feedback

## September 2011

A common question I get asked as a coach and when delivering programs is how to give someone feedback – especially when it needs to address behaviour.

Many would rate themselves as poor when it comes to providing feedback. The reasons for this are varied – possibly a skill we have not been taught. Maybe in our own careers, the role models for receiving feedback have been limited.

So often we resort to no feedback of the positive or negative kind. Alternately we water down the feedback and deliver a half truth. Yet our expectation is that the recipient will change their behaviour remains.

As humans, we all have an innate need to be liked. We fear an employees reaction to feedback. And this at times can be the key factor holding us back. In order to provide feedback we have to first become aware of our own emotions and beliefs surrounding giving feedback. In doing so, we can then address these and better equip ourselves to the task of feedback itself.

So here are a few ideas that might help.

### Remember your SCARF

When providing feedback, for it to be received and acted upon, the recipient must not feel threatened as this will achieve little. The last newsletter covered the five key elements which result in a threat response in our brains. **S**tatus, **C**ertainty, **A**utonomy, **R**elatedness and **F**airness. Remember our brains are wired to minimise danger and maximise reward and the threat response is so much more easily activated. Click here to read

### It's the Behaviour, Not the Person

The word behaviour is a starting point to preparing ourselves to give feedback. It is the behaviour we need to address and not the person. In taking this position we come from a starting point of working to support the person rather than making them wrong.

The most effective way to discuss areas requiring improvement is to focus on observable actions, not attitudes. By limiting your criticism to what you see with your own two eyes, you'll be more likely to refrain from judgments that can trigger a defensive reaction. In addition to stating the behaviour, also state the impact that the behaviour has on others, you, the workplace, customers etc.

Don't say: "You seem to be making a number of personal calls lately, and this has become very disruptive."

Suggestion: "I have heard you making a number of personal telephone calls lately. Is there something going on that you need our support with?"

### Avoid the use of Generalisations and Extreme words

Word such as "always, never, and worst" can be considered generalisations or extreme. Does the person really always do such and such? If you let slip any of these words, you may be overstating your case and not focusing on actual performance. That is unless they are applicable.

Don't say: "I am at a loss as to why you are always undermining my credibility."

Suggestion: "I want to talk to you about the meeting yesterday. I noticed on three different occasions you challenged my authority in front of my staff. To me, it felt like you were undermining my credibility."

You know I respect your input. In order for us to be on the same page in front of our team, it would be helpful if you came to me privately about these sensitive issues.”

### **It's Not at All About You**

Managers who are not accustomed to providing feedback will often sound accusatory when they are trying to assert their authority. You're on shaky ground if you find yourself using the word "you" followed by a negative comment.

Don't say: "You didn't meet the deadline we agreed to." With this language, tensions will be inflamed and the result will be a resentful employee. The word "you" becomes personal and sets off a threat response.

Suggestion: "We agreed to a Friday deadline. Can you tell me what problems you encountered?" This moves the employee into analysing the situation rather than becoming defensive.

### **Don't Why-ne**

In giving feedback the use of the words such as Who, What, and Where are perfectly acceptable. However, avoid using the word Why. The word "why" puts the listener on the defensive. We need to be careful about the words we use – as they either build trust or destroy it. And, as you know, trust is one of the most important motivators in the workplace.

Don't say: "Why is this only coming to my attention now? Why have you not kept us informed?"

Suggestion: "It is important that you keep us informed of your progress so we can give you the support you need to resolve these types of issues."

### **Use Questions to Give You Leverage**

It is often helpful to let employees discover for themselves what could be improved. This can be achieved by asking open ended questions.

Avoid talking so much that the recipient of the feedback is left feel like a naughty child.

It's more beneficial to ask questions to flush out the situation and more so to focus on a solution. It is important to provide the feedback and equally important to then move onto accountability and action and if necessary re-setting of expectations. Prod the employee, in a non-threatening way, into evaluating his or her own performance in an area where you have concern. Stay totally involved in the process by allowing the employee to make recommendations for their own improvement. Learning how to listen attentively and effectively question are key skills for good leadership. They help you get a broader perspective on a given situation and come from the perspective of a learner and not judge.

Don't say: "Leave it with me. I'll review it and get back to you on what needs to happen next."

Suggestion: "Tell me what has raised this issue now? What options need to be considered?"

### **Timing is Key**

Feedback should be given as close to when the event happened – both in the case of positive and negative feedback. Give feedback at an appropriate time. Praise employees for good work as soon as it is produced - whether you make your comments in the tearoom or in the lift or more formally in a meeting room. When giving negative feedback find the right moment, such as organising a brief

meeting in a private office. Give the right amount - Don't overwhelm the recipient with an overload of criticisms. Focus on one or two key areas.

### Verify Understanding

It is important to recognize that there always will be a difference between what you say and what people hear. Filters exist between the message sent and the message received. Asking the recipient to verify the message can assist to ensure understanding. You may be surprised at what you hear back. By engaging the recipient in the discussion, you will both understand each other's positions better.

### Next Steps

Develop an action plan - A one-on-one feedback session should finish with a list of behavioural goals. The employee should be clear about what to continue doing and to start doing. Try to end the session with the employee feeling motivated, not personally attacked.

Don't forget the basics around respecting your employee as an individual. If you value them, tell them that. People will be responsive to feedback and take action on that feedback if they feel secure and trust the relationship. But do not sugarcoat areas an employee needs to work on. There's little worse than walking away from a meeting thinking, "I think I've been told something – but I am not quite sure what."

For many people, feedback will be unexpected. Often people need time to process it through several stages until they accept the message. Be considerate of this and be prepared to support others in making the required change. We have all experienced the challenge of bringing about behavioural change and know it is not easy. Put yourself in the recipient's position when giving feedback. Empathy is key.

Let's turn the story around. As a manager, you want to be liked by your employees. You have always resented those who misjudge you and who find fault without knowing the full story. You vowed that when you became a manager that you would not follow this course of action because you know this type of behaviour does nothing to improve your performance but rather makes you mistrust people and devalue their capabilities.

Last but not least, also give positive feedback. When someone behaves in a way that you like, make sure and give them feedback to increase the likelihood of repeat behaviour. Again state the behaviour and the impact of the positive action.

Effective feedback happens when we have built trust with those we lead and work with.

