

FEEDBACK FOR LEADERS

In the “old” organization, feedback in the workplace was a one-way street. As the saying goes, “Rank has its privileges,” and one of them was leaders’ exemption from hearing criticism from employees. As cultural norms began to shift in the mid-20th century, so did dynamics in the workplace.

Increasingly, people have come to see the benefits of a more egalitarian culture, and workplace communication has thus been fostered. One aspect of this sea change is the subject here: feedback to leaders from employees. Although many prohibitions against criticizing authority figures still exist, what was once unheard of has become commonplace. Employees now frequently offer commentary and criticism, both solicited and unsolicited, on the performance and skills of managers and leaders. This criticism can either be underground—where it often has destructive results—or it can be out in the open where it is useful and productive.

In their high visibility positions, leaders’ talents and skills—and also their shortcomings — are easily observed. There seems to be an unconscious expectation on the part of many employees for their leaders to be without flaws, all-knowing and all-caring. Many leaders are, in fact, exceptional, yet we want more. We want them to be as close as possible to our ideal of perfection.

Alas, leaders are human, and very few are without some set of weaknesses or flaws. Which brings us back to the subject of feedback. When it inevitably does come, critical feedback is challenging for most leaders. Here are some suggestions that may help ease the sting of this experience.

First, as early as you can, develop leadership practices that de-sensitize you to criticism. Ask for it often and listen with genuine interest. Build in an evaluation component to every activity so that it becomes a familiar and routine

part of your organizational interchange. This doesn’t need to be formal or time-consuming, just a genuine request for feedback, such as “How could this meeting have been improved?” or “What thoughts do you have on this presentation?” This practice also serves as a model for employees to follow on their own, building in the expectation of continuous evaluation and improvement.

However, as with most things, moderation is the key. Providing a neutral arena for constructive criticism does not controvert the crucial importance of providing a primarily positive workplace setting. With acknowledgement and appreciation, the emphasis is on the contributions and the strengths of the people (including the leaders) in the organization, not their deficiencies. Kindness and respect should not be sacrificed for the yoke of a harsh and overly critical organizational culture. In fact, the ground of a healthy, well-balanced, and positive organizational culture is what makes it possible for critical feedback to serve a constructive purpose.

Second, develop emotional self-discipline. Learn to listen without defensiveness. At times, it may be appropriate to engage in dialogue to explore and better understand the message and its context.

When you receive criticism, you may feel surprised, angry, or hurt. That is not the time to react or comment, other than to thank the person for their input. With some recovery time, your sense of perspective will reassert itself, you’ll sort out the wheat from the chaff, and you’ll come to clarity about a constructive response.

Third, if a response is appropriate, then do so in a timely manner. Candid feedback from employees takes courage on their part, and is not without risk and effort. Do not let it sit unattended. It is important to respond with your understanding of what you heard and your plans for what you intend to do with the information.

Fourth, focus on the big picture, on the vision you have for your organization. Remember that good, consistent feedback is one of the roads that will get you there. The criticism may sting temporarily, but it can also

serve to propel you and the organization forward. (The numerous examples of political figures that have eschewed criticism from their staff and advisors illustrate the perils of over-protection from feedback.) An organization with emotionally mature leaders is far better equipped to weather the inevitable ups and downs of pursuing its goals.

And finally, work to set aside your ego, that part of you that may feel hurt or angered by the criticism. Jim Collins, in his outstanding book on management, *Good to Great*, found that humility is an important characteristic of the leaders at the “good-to-great” companies.

One gift of a leadership position is the continuing opportunity it provides for personal and professional growth. Learning how to receive and make constructive use of feedback is perhaps one of the more difficult lessons in leadership. It also holds commensurate rewards.

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