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Dept. of Communication: Hearing Between the Lines

Hearing Between The lines: How To Get What You Need When Feedback Goes Wrong

Ask yourself the following questions: "If I were not performing well: Would I want to know about it? When would I want to know about it? How would I want to know about it?"

The unanimous answers when I've asked employees the above questions are:

Yes

ASAP

Directly, specifically and supportively.

(For a full discussion of the above, see my article from the Cal Law **Recorder** "Performance Review Anxiety." Email me for a copy.)

Although we want feedback in the ways described above, it often doesn't come in those ways. It's often non-existent, late, done publicly, biased and, most painfully, it can be harsh and demeaning. The result is often that we become angry, defensive, emotionally disconnected and, most significantly, don't change our behavior.

But we need information underneath the words in order to change, grow and improve. The trick is to hear what's important and usable information and to disregard the unhelpful part.

So how do we go about extracting what's helpful from what isn't? A useful method to begin is to recognize the four most common ways that people give poor feedback and then learn what to do about each one.

There are four main ways that feedback is given badly. They are:
Unbalanced
Inaccurate
Irrelevant
Personally offensive

The first three focus on content that is, how we behave on the job. The last one will usually focus on who we are on the job. Let's now explore how to manage them.

Unbalanced Feedback will focus mainly on negative behavior and often the most recent negative event.

Joe was responsible for the company's annual report to its stockholders. Due to a printing company glitch, the server unexpectedly crashed and the report was three days late to his boss who was furious. This event occurred one month before his performance review and when the review was presented, this event took precedence over all the other good work that had happened during the year.

When receiving this kind of feedback, people may lose sight of their strengths and focus on their weaknesses. A better way of dealing with unbalanced feedback is to look at it in a larger context. Does this person tend to focus on the negative or have difficulty giving positive feedback? What have other people said about me over a measured time frame? Is this new feedback or have I heard this before? Have there been special issues recently that have caused this behavior to occur?

By looking at the larger context as well as the person who sent the message, Joe was able to restore balance and reinforce what he was doing well.

Inaccurate Feedback contains material you don't agree with; you

never did,
said or thought what's reported.

Mary's key customer received his printer order without the printer cartridges. Instead of calling her directly, he went to Mary's boss who blamed her for the problem. A later investigation showed that shipping had mis-packed the order.

In the above scenario, most people will get a bit stuck, focus on the feedback's inaccuracy and miss some important information. A better way of handling inaccurate feedback is to put aside the question of the feedback's inaccuracy and, where possible, focus on the accuracies. Ask yourself: Why might people look at me in this way? What are they perceiving or thinking? By looking at why her key customer was so quick to judge her, Mary learned how she was viewed by him and others.

Irrelevant Feedback is often not pertinent, not asked for and doesn't help you solve your problems. You find it hard to listen to all the unnecessary information.

Lisa asked her colleague for some guidance as to how to approach a co-worker concerning a project. This co-worker was known to be difficult. Lisa's colleague wouldn't stay focused on the problem and went on a long diatribe about the company's lack of performance feedback to difficult people and how these people were ruining the workplace. Lisa's eyes were glazing over. As an aside, the colleague then mentioned that the company offered training to help with people issues.

A better tactic than tuning out is to focus on the information that you need as soon as you hear it (or redirect the conversation toward what you really need.) Explore those pieces with targeted open-ended questions. Lisa zeroed in on the comment about available company resources and asked: What training is available? How often is it given? Who knows about it? By using this method, she was able to get the training she needed to successfully deal with her difficult co-worker.

Personally Offensive This last category of feedback is the most difficult for people to deal with. It will often contain negative opinions and unsupported assumptions about why something happened. The language may be

inflammatory, "You did this" or "You're always or never" doing something. The tone of voice may be accusatory, harsh, sarcastic.

Most of us who receive this type of feedback will become angry and defensive and explain ourselves all of which are seen as excuses. All of these behaviors raise the emotional level. The damage is harder to repair because it can touch us very deeply.

When Bob's promotion was given to someone less senior and with fewer qualifications, he decided to "let it all out." He accused his boss of "having it in for him" and hiring someone who "favored the party line."

Effectively dealing with offensive feedback means managing your emotions and not getting angry and defensive. It requires you to be reflective and not explain your actions in the heat of the moment. It also means acknowledging the other person's view of things as simply the way they see it, even if poorly presented, and not escalating the emotional level.

Very fortunately for Bob, his boss was able to hear the pain and disappointment behind the attack, not respond in kind, and therefore was able to help Bob through his crisis.

We all need feedback to grow and change. By using these methods, you'll be able to get what you need when others are not at their best.

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Conflict Resolution * Productivity Improvement

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