

Feedback

Why Your Success May Depend on It



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Introduction

As a leader, how do you know that your management style is effective, that your people believe in you or that you're on top of your game? You don't —unless you ask. Many managers today spend so much time trying to prove that they know their stuff, that they don't take the time to really find out if what they are doing is working. Feedback is a vital part of effective management and is essential in any business. Not only will it help your company, it will help you grow as a manager and as a person. Asking others what they think of you is not as easy as it might sound, though. Most of us find it difficult to hear personal criticism without taking it personally. Sometimes we don't ask questions about our performance because we really don't want to know the answers. This paper can help you see why feedback is imperative in any successful organization and will offer you ways of obtaining - and ultimately accepting – it. If gathered in the right way and in the right spirit, feedback can prove to be extremely useful...and somewhat less painful than you may think.

Just ask

Most of the frustration you will experience in life will be the result of your failure to take feelings into account. Trying to be cute, you will make snide remarks that you will sound easy, doesn't it? Just ask. For most of us it's not that simple. We all have a sort of love/hate relationship with feedback. We want to hear what others think about us — if what they think is good. But what if it's not? You're a leader, right? You didn't get where you are today by caring about what others think of you. You are good at your job. If you weren't how could you have come so far? Maybe your inability to accept criticism is keeping you from going further — from realizing your potential. Most likely, this inability is keeping you from motivating others to take risks and to reach their potential.

A director of a 50-person department prided herself in her hands-on style of management. She was on top of everything that happened in her department and she was more than aware of every step that was made by her people. What she considered involved, knowledgeable and efficient was seen as stifling and controlling by those beneath her. They were never given an opportunity to think outside the box...or to think for that matter. As a result, their work became mediocre. Projects lacked creativity and spontaneity. She never saw the power that she had to turn this around. All she had to do was ask.

Asking others what they think is not a sign of indecisiveness, lack of confidence or low self-esteem. The purpose is not to

just collect some “feel-good” comments, to find your true friends or to weed out those who disagree with you. Feedback is data. A good leader looks at all the data and information before instituting a new program or making a decision that affects an organization. The same level of consideration should go into evaluating and developing your management style.

Admit you don't have all the answers

Few of us have the ability to really see ourselves as others see us. That's one of the reasons why feedback is so important. How am I doing? Is this the way? If you had all the answers, you'd have no need for others' thoughts, views or opinions. The problem is that many managers operate under this very misconception. Because they already know everything, seeking advice would just be a futile exercise in humility. They know how they are doing. They know what others think of them. After all, how could anyone possibly have a different opinion. The need to check our behavior against others' reactions comes very naturally, though. In fact, we learn this skill early in life. An infant discovers, through his parents' obvious delight, that using his voice to make sounds is a good thing. A toddler will look at his mother's face for approval when he takes his first unassisted steps. A 5-year-old figures out, based on his peers' reactions, what attire is appropriate and “cool” for a big Kindergarten student. These are all forms of feedback that help us grow and develop.

Don't just ask out of curiosity

What do you hope to gain from feedback? This is the first question you need to ask yourself before you can proceed.

We're all a little curious about what others might be saying about us when we're not in the room, what they're thinking when we're leading a meeting or if they truly are more than happy to take on additional responsibilities. These aren't good enough reasons to survey employees, co-workers or supervisors. Feedback calls for a higher purpose. What do you want to know? Why do you want to know? From whom do you want to know? Develop clear and concise goals. Establish, at least in your mind, ways that you will obtain feedback and what you are going to do with the information once it is gathered. In your planning focus on areas that will have an impact on you and your leadership — ultimately the purpose behind your new fact-finding mission should be to improve your performance and in turn benefit your organization.

If, for instance, sales goals are not being met in your department you may want to probe into the matter to see if the sales staff isn't doing their jobs or if you have failed to give clear direction, proper motivation or sufficient recognition to those who go above and beyond. By making changes in your approach, you may be able to change the behavior of others and dramatically improve the performance of everyone involved — just by asking! Feedback is a powerful tool. Those who learn how to harness this power experience limitless growth — both personally and professionally.

Prepare yourself for feedback

You might know what they're going to say. You may fear what they're going to say. You're probably preparing your defense right now. Stop. Before you can receive constructive criticism, you have to not only prepare yourself to hear it, but to really listen.

Chances are you won't hear everything that you want to hear. None of us are perfect. You may be the best manager in your organization but you will still have people who don't like your style, who find you difficult to work for. That's okay. What you are looking for are ways that you can improve. When gathering feedback, look for themes. You can't react based on each and every opinion, but if you see the same comments being made, chances are they'll ring true for you. These are the things that you can focus on, realizing that they may be hindering your effectiveness as a manager.

Clear your mind of preconceived ideas of why your evaluators may rate you high or low in certain areas. Remember why you asked for feedback in the first place — to discover how others perceive you. It doesn't matter if their perceptions are grounded in fact. Your employees and your peers may be completely misinterpreting your

intentions, but perception is reality. That's what you need to keep in mind when dealing with feedback. If you are to benefit from learning how others perceive you, forget about trying to defend yourself. Your first inclination will be to search out the author of each unkind word and explain your position, your misunderstood demeanor, your upbringing, the fact that you were never allowed to own a pet...Anything to defend yourself! Before you go there, take a deep breath. Keep an open mind. Maybe you do come across as abrasive. Perhaps you could be a little more thoughtful when dealing with your staff. Once you get past the initial hurt, you can prepare yourself to really listen to what others think of you and to find ways to be a better manager.

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Prepare others for feedback

If you take the process seriously, so will those you ask to evaluate you. Be sincere. Let them know that you truly want to be a better leader — one who inspires others to do their best. People need to feel that they can be open and honest with no fear of retaliation. Demonstrate how going through this process will help the organization. Others need to see that your intentions are pure. People respect those who can admit they have faults, openly discuss them and strive to find ways to overcome them. Let them know that you want feedback because you know that you are not perfect and would like to grow in areas of weakness. Help them understand that they are able to see you in ways in which you are blind. This is a way for you to take a deep look at yourself through their eyes. What a wonderful tool!

In this vein, you need to impress upon those evaluating you the importance of brutal honesty. Receiving rave reviews is wonderful — but really doesn't get you anywhere as far as continual improvement is concerned. No one is perfect, so if you receive nothing but "love," you can deduce that your feedback is invalid. Of course you want to hear about the things that you do right. But just as important, and in many ways even more important, are the things that aren't working. That's where the real opportunity for growth lies. Above all, let your evaluators see how much you value their opinion

and what power they have in shaping the organization.

Load up the toolbox

There are many different ways to obtain feedback. To be successful, you'll want to use as many of them as you can. More formal forms may include written, anonymous surveys. These work well for those who are uncomfortable with face to face criticism. You'll find, especially with those who report to you, that this is the preferred method. With the written survey, evaluators can take their time, they can be anonymous, and they can convey their thoughts in a non- threatening environment. Many people feel more comfortable being honest when they can provide feedback in this way. Many people are also better at communicating when they can write down their thoughts.

Others may prefer to sit down and discuss areas of concern with you. When using this method, provide your evaluator with an outline that he or she can review and consider prior to your meeting. This will give you the opportunity to have some input in areas in which you are interested in receiving feedback.

While some prefer to write and some prefer to talk, others prefer a combination of the two. You may want to give a written survey and then invite those interested to sit down and discuss the contents.

Remember, there's no right way to get feedback as long as you're getting it. Different types of feedback work best with different types of people. Think about whom you want to survey and what approach will be most effective. Chances are you will want to load up your toolbox with a variety of methods.

Know to whom you are talking

When selecting someone from whom to gain input, make sure it is someone who is close enough to you and to the situation to give valuable feedback. The most insightful person on the administrative staff may be very good at reading people, but he may not be the one who knows you well enough to give you the type of feedback that you need. If you ask the wrong person, he'll be left grasping at something useful to say and you will be left feeling like he didn't take enough time in your evaluation.

Go back to your original goal in obtaining feedback. What do you want to know? If you want to identify the problem in communication with those who report to you, you probably don't need to ask your peers, or other managers. You need to ask your employees. Just as important as asking the right questions is asking the right people.

Don't just ask positive people

One major temptation is to only pick positive people to evaluate you. After all, some people are just negative and they are capable of only seeing the bad in every situation...and in every person. Our intrinsic need for positive reinforcement will compel us to gravitate toward the people who we know value us. You do need to hear the positive. You want to know what you are doing right, what works, what people like about you. If this is the only feedback that you receive, though, where is the opportunity for growth? Of course you have wonderful qualities. Sure you should delight in hearing about them. But, you also need to hear the negative. This is where the real growth and improvement will take place. This is why you are going through this process. Use these negative people.

Of course you have wonderful qualities. Sure you should delight in hearing about them. But, you also need to hear the negative. This is where the real growth and improvement will take place. This is why you are going through this process. Use these negative people.

In this process, negative people serve a vital purpose. These are the people who you know have a problem with you, with the organization or with various processes. This is your opportunity to find out what is really bugging them. Most likely, they have a legitimate point. The fact that you would subject yourself to their scrutiny and that you value their opinion enough to ask will go a long way. You need to involve them in the process of improvement and engage them as partners to work on areas of growth opportunity.

Don't take it personally

Any time you undergo an evaluation process you run the risk of hearing something that you don't want to hear. When you commit yourself to the value of feedback, it's more than a risk... it's a sure thing. If you go into it with the right mindset and with your goals in mind, you can learn not to take criticism personally. Everyone is different. There are things in your personality that help make up who you are. These things won't always work with everyone and that's alright. The goal of feedback is not to change who you are or to conform to someone else's idea of the perfect manager. The goal is to maximize your strengths and to minimize your weaknesses. First, you need to discover what these weaknesses are. Keep in mind, too, that sometimes what makes us strong in one

area of management makes us weak in another area.

A director at our facility, for instance, is known for her flexibility. Her personality is friendly, open and inviting. She leads by example and acts more as a mentor than a “boss.” While this strength enables most of her employees to flourish, to take ownership over projects and to reach their potential, others find this style too unstructured. At least one of her employees was very critical of her “lack of direction and her laid back style.” This employee needed structure. She not only wanted to be told exactly what she should do in every situation, she wanted it spelled out for her in clear-cut steps. Her vocal displeasure with the management style of the director left the director doubting her abilities, questioning her successes, and wanting to change her strengths. Should she change the things that made her who she was and that worked for the majority of her employees? Of course not. Once she stopped taking the feedback personally and looked at it objectively, she realized this. Should she keep this detail-seeking employee’s needs in mind when dealing with her? Yes. That’s the value of feedback. By gathering formal feedback, this director discovered what worked for most of her employees, found ways of dealing with others, and saved herself from making knee-jerk decisions and changes that would have proven to be detrimental for her group as a whole.

While you may believe that experienced leaders should have so much self-confidence that they never question themselves or their worth as leaders, this sort of self-doubt is part of being human. We all go through periods where we strongly question why anyone would even think we had the skill to do what we do. Thank goodness we also have periods when we think we are brilliant and that no one could do what we do. In the process of gaining feedback, if you are lucky, you will feel both. If you can accept that you do have weaknesses and that everyone does, you’ll be less likely to take input so personally that it paralyzes you or attacks your self-confidence.

Take it personally

While you can’t allow feedback to attack your overall sense of self, admit the part that you play. As in the case of our flexible director, she was able to admit that she isn’t very detailed. She’s a “big picture” person and while that is a tremendous strength, detail continued to be a weakness – one that for some of her employees was a big stumbling block to their success. Instead of minimizing its effect on a segment of her department, she took steps to try to strengthen this area. Often, simply being upfront with employees and letting them know of this weakness helped them to understand her approach and appreciate her style. She didn’t try to

change who she was, but she did try to be more sensitive to this weakness to give her employees what they needed. Making adjustments to your style doesn’t mean that you are changing who you are. You’re just being a good manager.

Recognize feedback.

Feedback doesn’t always have to come in the form of an organized session. You can learn to be alert to feedback you receive every day. A baby cries – a mother gets the message that it’s feeding time. A teen stops communicating – a teacher knows that something is wrong. The corporate world is no more complicated, yet we are often oblivious to such feedback. Think about it. You know when you’ve bombed trying to sell an idea – long before you get an official answer.

A part of your analysis should include simply learning how to observe others. Watch people when you are talking and look for body language. Try to determine when things start going south and make adjustments.

Does your boss begin to fidget, make out his to do list or clip his nails every time you give your weekly report? Perhaps you need to get to the point more quickly. Did your secretary get the “glazed over look” when you recounted the stimulating market analysis report that you just carefully crafted? Maybe she just needs the highlights next time. The subtle non-verbals speak volumes. They provide honest in-the-moment feedback to those not too self-absorbed to pick up on them. Body language – folding of the arms, staring into the floor, leaning back in the chair – can tell you a lot about the effectiveness of your message and your approach. When you observe these signs, use them as valuable feedback. Reflect on the situation and think about what you could have done differently or how you can avoid such a reaction in the future. Many successful leaders are not necessarily the ones who know the most. They are the ones who know and understand the most about people. They have learned how to be sensitive to others’ behavior – gaining insight into their thoughts, needs and likes.

Words won’t harm you

Sticks and stones will break your bones but words will never harm you....obviously a comeback cleverly constructed by a desperate mother intent on protecting her offspring from bullies who always seemed to instinctively know

which insults would hit closest to home. In the corporate world, just as in life, this saying brings little comfort. The bottom line is that sometimes words do hurt us. Feedback can be painful. Hearing criticism can sometimes reduce us to the feelings of an insecure child. Some people completing evaluations will take the opportunity to go for the heart. They'll see this as an opportunity to get something off their chest that may have occurred five years ago. They may intentionally set out to hurt you.

As difficult as it sounds, you have to get past this and realize that insight can be gained even from evaluations completed out of anger. You may not have realized that they were so angry. You may be able to mend fences and build a stronger working relationship. The key is to not act on a gut level. Don't react to feedback immediately. Take time to digest what has been said - to look at it objectively without getting defensive. You have to find ways to get the emotion out of it. Give yourself a day and then carefully consider the messages that may be accurate. Respect the message even if the messenger may have acted out of malice. Chances are that there is a shred of truth in every false accusation and certainly there will be things that come out of these evaluations that you need to address.

Look for patterns

While you need to take all feedback seriously, you don't have to make changes to address every criticism that pops up in feedback. What you want to do is to look for patterns. This will help you to prioritize areas of growth and weed out your advisors' own displacement issues. Very often an advisor may have strong feelings toward a certain aspect of your leadership style that may be less about you and more about their own personal hang-ups. If you receive 30 completed surveys and all but two have some sort of criticism about your availability, you can move accessibility to the top of your priority list. If only one evaluator mentions that you are intimidating or unapproachable, don't take this to heart. Unless you see it become a pattern, don't waste energy trying to address something that may simply be a misconception on the part of an evaluator.

By looking for patterns you can determine if something in the survey is an objective area and needs to be addressed or if it is something that you need to keep in the back of your mind in case it starts popping up in subsequent surveys. Patterns allow you to look at your leadership as a whole and not as isolated incidents.

Realize that results take time

You were convinced that gathering data – or feedback – would help you grow as a leader. You've obtained your feedback, looked for patterns and identified areas to address and improve. When will the big change occur? You're ready for results. Be patient. Change is difficult and takes time. Be prepared to fail. In fact, expect to fail. Making significant, permanent, changes to your style will take a lot of practice. For a new approach to become a habit may take months. Overcoming a bad habit may take not only time, but help from others as well. Enlisting the help of your co-workers can help you stick to your goals and can help let others see how important this is to you.

One director was made aware of a specific behavior that she had which was often perceived as a sign that she was being unsupportive. In an effort to change, she asked a friend to give her a secret hand signal in meetings whenever she exhibited this behavior. It became a humorous way for her to become more aware of her actions and to change this "bad habit."

Not only may it take time for you to make appropriate changes, it will take even longer to see its effects. Once you make a change people may not recognize it as quickly as you would like. It's difficult to see people in a new light. Once people have formed an opinion of you it will take time for them to notice that you have changed. Don't expect miracles overnight. If you remain consistent and sincere in your efforts, you'll eventually reap your rewards.

Create an open environment

There are tremendous secondary gains to obtaining feedback. Anytime you engage others in improving processes — including your management style, you will see increases in productivity, morale and job satisfaction. Through feedback you will also experience the creation of a more open work environment where people feel comfortable communicating with each other and working as a team. Your staff will see that you don't think that you are perfect so you probably don't expect them to be perfect either. It allows people the freedom to make mistakes, admit mistakes and, most importantly, learn from mistakes. This new environment is one in which personal and professional growth is encouraged and supported.

Sound too good to be true? Feedback alone won't create the perfect work environment — its doubtful that one exists. A work environment consists of different people who all come with different backgrounds, skills, personalities, work ethic and values, not to mention competing goals. With

so many differences, you are bound to experience bumps in the road. By opening communication lines, however, your journey to organizational excellence will be a much smoother ride. Feedback can help you accomplish this.

Return the favor

With this new open environment where co-workers and employees feel free to tell you what they think and perceive, you now have a responsibility to do the same. While you now expect your employees to be honest with you, how honest are you when giving them feedback? How good are you at telling your boss what is and isn't working for you? Just as difficult as hearing feedback is giving feedback. How many times have you been asked by a superior what you thought about his speech, his opening jokes...his tie? Were you honest? When Mr. CEO steps down from the podium and looks directly at you and asks "How did I do? Did I come across as boring?" what will you say? Will you tell him that from your vantage point in the room you could see one-quarter of the audience updating PDA's, several more counting tiles on the ceiling, and even several trying their hand at the art of origami? If you value feedback and want to be seen as a trusted advisor you will tell him. Use tact. You can be honest without being hurtful. Just as you have a newfound appreciation for the power of feedback, you'll find that others do as well. After all, we all want to do our best and want to improve ourselves. Giving feedback can be difficult, but it is a gift, and given in the right spirit will be accepted as a gift.

Let it bring out the best in you

When looking at feedback and identifying weaknesses be careful not to work so hard at improving a minor weakness that you diminish a valuable strength. It's a delicate balance, one which can be maintained and improved upon with open and honest communication.

It's not enough to be a good sport, to not let negative comments paralyze you or to try to make changes for the good of the whole. Take it a step further. Let feedback truly bring out the best in you. Know who you are and be comfortable with yourself. Don't feel that you have to fit into the "management mold." There's no such thing. Through feedback, you are simply looking at your strengths and weaknesses, possible problem areas and finding creative ways to address potential problems. Just as you have strengths and weaknesses, so does every person in your team. We all bring different gifts to the table. Without some of these gifts, our team would be useless. When looking at feedback and identifying weaknesses be careful not to work so hard at improving a minor weakness that you diminish a valuable strength. It's a delicate balance, one which can be maintained and improved upon with open and honest communication.

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