

The Power of Feedback

"This is not me! I am greatly disappointed that my boss, peers and direct reports have a totally different view of me and how I am as a leader." This is often the first response I get when executives get their 360-degree report on how they are assessed by people around them.

Whether it is in the form of a multi-rater report or one of those dreaded performance evaluation conversations, learning how you are seen by others is not a pleasant experience. What makes giving and receiving feedback so difficult? What are ways by which we can gain the greatest value from one of the most uncomfortable of human interactions?

Many experts say that openness to honest feedback is "cultural in nature" and that there are national and organizational cultures where it either thrives or fails, is encouraged or discouraged. While that's generally true, I believe it is incumbent on every leader to consciously create an environment where people can provide useful information to each other.

And it is always the CEO who will set the tone and create that context, as the following examples make painfully clear.

CEO A, who is in his early 50s, leads a private, family-owned and controlled group of companies in manufacturing, sales and distribution. Being a third-generation CEO, he is always being measured against his predecessors who founded and grew the business. When he gets wind of negative comments about his decisions from subordinates, he is visibly upset.

While he is quite extroverted and outgoing, people sense that when he meets with them in one of his "kapihan meetings," he relishes only the "positive" comments so they often sugarcoat their observations. They believe they earn "brownie points" and are better remembered that way.

CEO B is a 40 year-old entrepreneur whose digital marketing and advertising business has been acquired by a global media entity. This person is quite introverted but his leadership style is highly interactive and involved. Beyond formal meetings, he always engages with staff at all levels. He asks questions and listens very intently. Feedback thrives and risks, such as the impending loss of big clients, have been averted.



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CEO C is close to retirement age. He is a fourth-generation CEO of a group of publicly listed companies with diversified concerns. Theirs is a culture of high performance and achievement. Almost like a local General Electric, the group wants to be a market leader in the businesses they invest in.

The company is keen to expand to the rest of Asia and realizes that sustaining success calls for an engaging bench of leaders who are strong in tasks and relationships. First thing they embark on is building a systematic process of obtaining feedback from multiple stakeholders. They are creating a culture where feedback is welcome.

What gives the feedback process a bad reputation is when one comes out of it feeling "attacked," "put down", "judged or condemned". It is directed "globally" at one's personhood and is generally invalidating. It is unhelpful when there are no suggestions on how one can do better. When you look deeper, it is being driven more by the needs of the critic than the subject of feedback.

Helpful feedback, on the other hand, affirms the worth of the person who is the subject of evaluation. It makes a clear distinction between the person

— her needs, values and goals — and specific behavior and aspects of work process and outcomes. It means you recognize that the person is not reduced to what she or he does, while still maintaining that strong accountability for such behavior and work results.

Absolutely no one can know the whole truth about another person, which is why we need constant feedback from all those around us. We need to learn to humbly ask others what they think about how we perform, listen and ask for suggestions about how we can be a better leader. The approach also works in other aspects of our lives and can help us become a better spouse or partner, parent, friend and person. That is the essence and power of feedback. 

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