

FEEDBACK



The metrics of employee performance -- what is measured -- are not as important as how evaluation is done: routinely and directly soliciting feedback from an open and curious stance, and then taking action based on the findings.

Ever had an employee come to you and say, "You know boss, I really achieved only 73 percent of my productive capacity today, but I'll do better tomorrow"? Ever tried to assess your own performance, even just the amount of effort you put in, much less actual work output? Difficult, isn't it? Not too many of us have jobs where the link between effort and result is unequivocal.

Meanwhile, daily pressure continues to increase. We all want to accomplish something noteworthy. Practicalities may seem to leave no choice but to pull out all the stops to deliver good numbers. Even the cubicle walls seem to whisper: "survival of the fittest, dog eat dog, nice guys finish last"

For all the "balanced scorecards" put together by academics, two-by-two matrices constructed by consultants, or the "numbers" dissected by market pundits, we have yet to find anyone pointing out effective leadership measures. Metrics so obvious that any manager could assess her performance and take corrective action. Would that someone had!

To help keep insecurity at bay, what every good manager needs is continuous feedback about performance. Yet anyone who has sat in the manager's chair knows how little feedback one gets during the course of a day. In fact, being promoted often means the end of virtually all feedback. The manager's boss assumes that the results will speak for themselves -- either the person will or won't deliver. The staff is not accustomed to giving their assessments -- either because they are afraid, or the possibility is not in their consciousness.

Most companies pay way too much attention arguing about the proper metrics to assess performance without paying enough attention to insuring the process is actually implemented. Often, some form of 360° feedback is included.

A word about that: we believe that 360° feedback instruments are the bane of too many organizations due to overkill, "Tell me again, what exactly am I supposed to do with feedback about 85 traits?" A typical example played out at one company that wanted to ease conversations about promotions. With the best of intentions, the HR department identified 13 performance factors, and then described elements of each

one at every level of the organization chart. But the list got so long that hopeful employees could not prioritize. They could not distinguish between satisfying basic job requirements, such as meeting deadlines, and above-and-beyond-the-call, "promotable" achievement, such as innovating new programs. They would count how many boxes they had "checked off," rather than weighing what it really took to succeed at the next level, the two or three key factors separating one level from the next. So any promotion denied led to an intractable confrontation.

Measuring what really matters

It's easy to get lost in how many things can be measured. When that happens, we may forget that what is measured is not as important as the fact that we routinely and directly solicit feedback on our performance from an open and curious stance -- and then take action based on the findings. So the very first order of business after any promotion or job change is to raise the question of how the organization will go about measuring our contributions. Then set about answering not only what is measured (remember to keep it simple!), but also, and more important, how the measurement process will unfold (encouraging straightforward participation on a recurring basis).

The potential power of feedback has been demonstrated by one of the most effective managers at GE, a 40-year veteran, who took Jack Welch's leader effectiveness variables to heart. Welch promoted five critical characteristics of good leaders, the extent to which they had high energy, were able to energize others, worked effectively, had the edge to make tough calls, and brought a sense of passion to their work. He called these the four "Es" plus one "P".

The veteran manager had been running a 2,500-person organization delivering essential business services to the various divisions while saving them 50%. His was a successful shop -- innovative, highly acknowledged outside the company. Yet the "4E + 1P" construct opened him up to the probability that he had some "flat spots."

He decided to ask his organization, in a series of town hall meetings, for feedback about his own performance. What he heard astounded him. Staff pointed out that he micro-managed many tasks and spent far too much time on inconsequential issues. Imagine hearing that un-adulterated assessment, and in public forums, no less! He realized he was going to have to change, and he asked staff for help in doing that. Delegation and prioritization were the two behaviors he felt were essential to work on.

A few months later Bob happened to catch him in his office, and he motioned Bob to sit down. "I can't believe how well my division is performing," he said. "Ever since I got serious about setting clearer priorities for myself and worrying less about whether my people were doing their jobs, our numbers have gone through the roof."

"Great," Bob replied. "What is the biggest change you noticed?"

"Ironic you should ask me that. I was sitting here just thinking that my phone no longer rings. I have so much more time to concentrate on those few things I should be focused on while my people are getting the job done every day. I really marvel at how much time and effort I used to waste, unknowingly!"

How to get feedback

It took decades for the manager above to find the way to get the right feedback. We can't afford to wait that long.

To put it bluntly: feedback won't mean a thing if we ain't got the right frame of mind. Like the GE veteran, we must be open, curious. And that means being able to take ourselves lightly, to be comfortable in the unknown, to be secure enough to let go of our need to know everything. All too often, we resist feedback because we, or others, confuse it with critique or, in simpler English, criticism.

Here's how to distinguish between the two:

Criticism	Feedback
- Interprets	- Describes
- Is judgmental	- Is value-neutral
- Has an agenda	- Has no agenda
- Reduces options	- Provides multiple options
- Affirms control	- Is growth-affirming

One of Hewlett Packard's senior managers is renowned for his ability to give feedback as we're describing it. First, he focuses on tone, making sure that he and the employee are relating well. Then he asks permission to explore the performance issue. He doesn't say much, nor does he need to. He knows the key is to ask questions and then listen. When he does speak, he's most likely to share an insight that has emerged naturally as he listens. Sometimes a surprising answer emerges, such as the employee resigning voluntarily. On other occasions, a remedial program is put in place; this may lead to a turnaround in problematic behaviors. Regardless of what happens, the goal is to reach a dignified conclusion in an expeditious fashion.

Wouldn't we all hope to get unpleasant feedback in this way? And on the flip side: wouldn't we benefit by being able to accept feedback with the same tonal quality in our listening?

We are all human, fallible, vulnerable to our own thinking, our self-importance, our egos. By giving others the power to comment on our behavior and effectiveness, we go a long way towards achieving a self-correcting process that measures performance and gives us the chance to change for the better.

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