

FEEDBACK: GIFT TO THE GIVER



“Do you mind if I give you a little destructive criticism?”

— an executive speaking across his desk to another executive
New Yorker cartoon, Jan. 10, 2005

Jo really didn't mind that she never heard from her new boss. He was at headquarters, time zones away, but she'd always been a self-starter. So what if her emails and phone calls went unanswered. She'd always worked for hands-off bosses, and had consistently delivered results and earned praise.

After several months, Jo was pleased to get on the boss's calendar. He'd be in town for a three-day meeting, and promised a leisurely “catching up” conversation. When the appointment shrank to a one-hour lunch, Jo was a little disappointed. When they sat at a table in the same restaurant as the meeting and participants came by the table to talk to the boss, Jo shuffled her mental agenda and re-calibrated her expectations.

She'd just taken a bite of her sandwich when the boss said, “I need to give you a little feedback. A couple of the senior managers aren't pleased with the work you've been doing. It feels to me as if you're off your game.” Jo lost her appetite.

“Can you be a little more specific?” she asked.

“Not really,” he answered. “They just don't feel the program is as strong as it could be.” And he turned to talk to another colleague who had come by.

Jo doesn't really remember the rest of the lunch. When the boss went back to the meeting, Jo headed for the rest room. So rattled was she that she actually found herself — for the first and only time in her life — in the men's room.

Eventually, Jo realized that the experience told her as much, or more, about the boss's weaknesses as her own. Like a lot of managers, he was clearly uncomfortable offering negative feedback. (In fact, pundits list lack of feedback among the top three villains in poor work performance — along with lack of clear expectations and lack of skills.) We could talk about a lot of things Jo's boss could/should have done differently: ensuring privacy, removing distractions, setting context, providing specifics, allowing time for dialogue. But that's all blocking-and-tackling. It fails to address the fundamental problem: a blurred line between feedback and criticism.

Even if we're simply pointing out or describing another person's behavior as a neutral observer, we're acting as a critic. Feeling judged, the person to whom we are giving “feedback” is likely to head south emotionally.

The first obstacle in such performance evaluation is a simple fact of life: we really have no idea how we appear to anyone else. Yes, I threw the ball; but how did that look to someone else? Awkward or graceful; fast or hostile; gentle or inept? I have no clue unless I can see my performance on video. Think about how many times you've seen yourself in a photo and reacted along the lines of, "That can't be me!" So although your feedback is something "objectively observable," the other person may have a hard time hearing you.

Second, when you go beyond behavior to suggest that the person self-examine the results of her actions, you may pitch her into an analytic frame of mind. She's likely to critically compare what you say her about her actions with what she intended to do. This may knock her off balance (like Jo). It could trigger an emotional response – guilt, defensiveness, anger, despair – that spirals the conversation downward.

Relaying an observation from a third party can also be problematic. It's easy to get into a point-counterpoint game as both of you interpret other people's reactions. Why is the boss's view of how the senior manager viewed Jo's performance better than Jo's view of the senior manager's reaction? Each of them was guessing, really just making it up – unless they asked the senior partner. So what seems like a good feedback strategy – using objective evidence – is built on a tenuous foundation.

We suggest an entirely different approach – one in which the deliverer's intent is to share his experience, his feelings, in a way that will surface new possibilities. In this kind of feedback conversation, we take responsibility for own mental state – for sustaining clear presence throughout.

Because one's inner state is essentially invisible to someone else, sharing feelings and thoughts is often very powerful. Then, we may express even profoundly "negative" feelings without creating a big punch. Because we've made our inner state the focal point, the process will feel much like letting air out of a balloon. No matter what we say, we give the other party time and room enough to keep or regain their balance. So, at every moment, a fresh start is possible.

For example, Jo's boss might have shared: "I've been feeling uncomfortable as you've started rolling out your project. I'm having a hard time connecting with your process and feel confused about where you're leading the group. And I'm puzzled by some of the reactions I'm hearing. Let me check in with you: how do you see things unfolding? What do you observe? How are you feeling about your progress? How do you see your contribution?" Such an opening would have encouraged Jo to become reflective; it could have opened a true dialogue.

Behavior is usually the consequence of deeply held beliefs, mental models that become second nature to the extent that people may no longer see them as just assumptions! Someone regarded as a "poor communicator," for example, may be operating with the notion that it is rude to intrude. Without feedback this person may never see the thinking that leads him astray in a business setting.

Seeing one's mental guideposts requires a realization, a fresh thought. The tricky thing is that to achieve that result, the feedback giver, too, must be reflective and open to a

shift. Jo's boss would have needed to set up the meeting differently – not only to help put Jo more at ease, but to make sure that he was able to keep his own mind clear of distractions and listen.

When we listen deeply, from a quietly curious state of mind, we encourage calmness in the other person. From that feeling, she can be more receptive to the unknown; in other words, more open to see what floats into her awareness. Thus, she's more likely to get insights about how to change.

Open-ended questions help maintain the right frame for the conversation. Jumping to conclusions about what you are likely to hear will shut down the exploratory, learning process for both of you. The true benefit of feedback comes from creating opportunities for continuous growth, learning, improvement – on both sides.

How often have you heard the phrase, "Feedback is a gift"? And how often have you replied in your mind, "Yeah, right!" Feedback is truly a gift...but it's the giver who receives it. In the process of delivering feedback in an open-minded way, we are invited to explore our own thinking, our mental assumptions, out loud with another person. That process leads to surprisingly fresh ideas and even, occasionally, profound change – for the person giving the feedback. Whether or not the "feedback-ee" gets anything is another question entirely.

Jo's boss didn't just risk damaging her productivity for a long time. Perhaps even more important, he sabotaged his own performance and missed an opportunity to learn something about himself.

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