

Giving feedback that fuels success

Leaders must reframe thinking, approach to successfully help employees

BY EILEEN CHADNICK

Acknowledgement and feedback are critical to help employees grow, develop skills and confidence and feel appreciated. But, too often, managers lack the proficiency to effectively provide feedback — both for good performance and more problematic performance.

Giving tough feedback can be a source of stress, especially for new leaders. They worry about repercussions: Will the conversation compromise the employee's feelings and create conflict and tension in the relationship?

When handled well, constructive feedback conversations can represent important opportunities to develop people, improve performance and build trust in a leader-employee relationship. To successfully provide such feedback, consider the following points:

Reframe your thinking about feedback: Do you see feedback as a necessary evil and something to get over with quickly? Or do you see it as an opportunity to invest in people and support their development? Leaders who loath giving feedback can work on reframing this as an opportunity instead of an obstacle or challenge.

Reflect on the following questions: How do I get this feedback conversation over with painlessly and minimize damage? This is a defensive way of approaching the situation —

the get-it-over-with-fast approach is limiting and does little to build the person or develop the relationship.

How can I turn this into an opportunity to show I value the employee and believe in his potential? What do I need to do and say to ensure the employee feels respected and not personally judged? How can I inspire the employee to work towards his true potential? How can I use this conversation to build trust in our relationship while building higher performance?

These questions come from a learner's orientation and will likely prompt even more questions leading to more possibilities.

Our best results come when we put ourselves in a learner's mindset and ask learner questions of ourselves and others, according to Marilee Adams, founder of the Inquiry Institute in Lambertville, N.J., and author of *Change Your Questions, Change your Life*. A learner comes from a stance that is open, solutions-oriented, collaborative, curious and appreciative. A judger is closed, defensive, heavily based on previous assumptions and right-wrong oriented.

Giving feedback from a learner's mindset can vastly change a seemingly difficult feedback conversation into one that is more productive from both a performance and engagement outcome.

Feedback is not a monologue: The

■ BEST PRACTICE TIPS

10 tips for better feedback

- Check your mindset before having a feedback conversation and put yourself into the learner's mode.
- Let the employee know the purpose of the conversation at the outset rather than catching him off-guard in the middle of another conversation. The former is more respectful and the latter can erode trust.
- Encourage a two-way conversation versus a monologue by asking a lot of learner questions and being prepared to listen.
- Be empathetic and put yourself in his shoes. No matter how careful the conversation, constructive feedback can be difficult for those on the receiving end.
- Balance the feedback with positive acknowledgement of what is working.
- Explore collaboratively how the person can use his strengths to overcome challenges.
- Be a champion for better performance and believe in the employee's capacity.
- Acknowledge the person for being open to the feedback and keep the door open to further dialogue and support.
- Be mindful of your words, tone and expression — they are as important as your intent.
- Make feedback part of an ongoing dynamic and an expected part of a learning culture.

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■ MANAGING/LEADERSHIP

Show empathy, mind your tone

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phrase “giving feedback” almost inherently — and inaccurately — implies a one-way monologue. Constructive feedback conversations are best when they are two-way dialogues. While the leader needs to be clear and direct in sharing her observations and concerns, it’s equally important to encourage dialogue and ask learner-style questions, encouraging input and discussion.

For example: “I noticed you have been missing some important deadlines and seem a bit distracted. I’d like to discuss this with you and perhaps we can explore ways to address this? What do you see as the challenge? How is this impacting the team? What can you try to do differently? What are you willing to commit to?”

This approach includes clear and direct communication about what has been observed yet it also creates the space to understand what is going on. It is not prescriptive but invites exploration, reflection and, as the conversation progresses, moves through action, planning and accountability.

In a feedback dialogue, the leader’s listening is as important as the questions he asks.

Balance the positive with the constructive: Feedback should never be all about what’s not working. Balance the feedback conversation by acknowledging what is working and leveraging a person’s existing strengths and skills to address the issue. This is imperative so the employee is not demoralized and maintains his belief in himself. As well, this approach lets the employee know he is valued and recognized for his strengths, despite the challenges.

Focus on behaviours and not char-

acter: When giving negative feedback, never make it about a person’s character. Instead, focus on the behaviours. For instance, if a person is missing important opportunities in a sales role, do not say, “You are negligent.” Instead, speak to the behaviour: “We’ve noticed you are missing some key opportunities” or “We’ve noticed you are not following up on important leads.”

Conversely, it is appropriate to find merit in his character if there is something appropriate to acknowledge: “I know you are hard-working, tenacious and care a lot about this job...” This positive affirmation can help to balance out the feedback.

Incorporate coaching into the feedback conversation: Increasingly, leaders are expected to coach their people to grow capacity and performance and create more engagement. Feedback opportunities are ideal for coaching.

Consider the difference between those two scenarios. In one, the employee is told his sales results are too low and need to be improved. In the other, the employee is advised there is a need to improve his sales results and the leader engages in a collaborative conversation to explore what might be holding him back, what he needs to do to succeed and how he will be accountable.

The first scenario is like delivering bad news and then leaving him to sink or swim on his own. The second approach takes a coaching stance and provides support and discovery as well as a plan for addressing the issue. The coaching not only addresses the particular issue, it can also create new skills and learning that will have longer-term value.

Don’t save it all for the performance review: Performance reviews can be

important opportunities to discuss performance, goals and future directions, but there should be no big surprises during formal reviews. Ideally, performance development is a fluid, ongoing process and not a one-time event. When feedback is saved up for only the formal review discussion, it can create unnecessary worry and tension.

Create a learning culture that values feedback: Whether you manage a small team, a larger department or a whole company, think about how you can create a learning culture that values and expects regular feedback. A leader can reflect on ways to link feedback to the organization’s core values. For example, “In the spirit of our values related to continuous improvement, I’d like to talk to you about how we can build on your new business development skills to take them to a higher level.”

Show empathy and mind your tone and words: While a leader’s intention and attitudes regarding feedback are important, so is the communication style. Some leaders are naturals at being empathetic and respectful while being clear and direct. Others, less so. A leader would be wise to reflect on her skill level and the opportunity for further development.

Feedback opportunities are an important part of developing a team and an organization’s talent. Growing people, not just projects and results, is what defines great leadership.

Eileen Chadnick is principal of Big Cheese Coaching in Toronto. She specializes in leadership development, emotional intelligence and retirement work-life planning for boomers. She can be reached at Eileen@Bigcheese-coaching.com or visit www.bigcheese-coaching.com.