

“Feedback, Every Which Way”

By Carol Leavitt, MBA



Recently I was fortunate to observe a truly profound event – a manager setting in motion a new process with his employees. In the team's weekly staff meeting, "Roger" was ready to take a giant step. A seasoned manager with a few rough edges, Roger works in a major accounting firm. As his coach, we have been working together to improve his interpersonal skills so he could build trust and respect in his team, and be more effective in achieving results with and through his team members.

In the staff meeting I attended, Roger broke the ice with a bit of humor. “I know it's hard to believe, but I’m going to be making some changes in the way I interact with you. I'm going to try a 'kinder, gentler' approach.” I heard faint nervous chuckling throughout the room as Roger continued. “I know I haven’t been the easiest boss to get along with. I know I have been hard on you as I push for results. It may surprise you, but I know my tone is pretty tough at times, which created some resentment toward me and how I manage.” As Roger’s admission sunk in, there was little response from the room, other than many heads staring down at the table so they could avoid making eye contact. Roger persisted, “I’ve been getting some coaching lately, and I’m actually learning a lot about a different way to do things. I’m learning about how I come across, how that affects both whom I work with, and the results we get. We all know, those results aren’t always great. So, for all of us, I want to make some changes.”

A few brave souls raised their eyes and peered at Roger, with surprise, interest, and perhaps hope.

“I have some new tools for communicating with you to help you be the best you can be. Most importantly, I have a new appreciation for how valuable each of you is as a member of our team. I'd like to begin by establishing a weekly one-on-one meeting with each of you, to discuss your workload, and any concerns or questions you’d like to raise. I’d like to play a stronger role in coaching you, to help further develop your skills and your strengths, and assist you in contributing your very best here at work. Further, I’d like for you to coach me also – by sharing your honest opinion, offering your insights on decisions and issues, and giving me feedback on how I’m doing as your manager.”

As I looked around the room, the faces communicated disbelief – rolling eyes, shaking heads, and grimaces that said, sarcastically, “yeah, right!” However, Roger would not be discouraged. “I know this sounds suspicious, and you probably think that it’s very unlikely anything will change. Right?” Reluctant nodding. “Well, the only way you’ll believe me is when I walk the talk. I don’t intend this meeting to just be a pep talk, or hollow words to try to motivate you. I intend to make some significant changes to be a better manager.”

As I surveyed the room, I could see the faces expressing hope, as if they really wished that what he said were going to come true. As his final gesture, Roger said, "I'd like to start by talking with each of you, privately, to hear your thoughts on where you think I should focus first. I'll

schedule those meetings with you this week, but in the meantime ... what questions do you have about what I've just said?"

Roger had done an amazing and courageous thing, by taking the first big step to bolstering his relationships with staff members and re-igniting their enthusiasm for their jobs. It would, however, take a lot more focused attention and dedicated work over the next few months to assuage skepticism and have his intentions play out smoothly, as he "walked his talk" and really connected with team members.

Making the Environment Safe for Feedback

Rogers's story is not unique. Andrea and I coach many managers who need help connecting with and leading employees. Some of our clients are new managers who, because they don't know any better, boss their employees to ensure that employees know who the boss really is. Others, feeling a need to maintain control and authority, dictate to staff members not only the tasks they must accomplish, but also how they should go about accomplishing them. Still others simply don't talk much to their employees, often because they are buried in the work of managing. This leaves employees at a loss to know how they are doing or if their work is even noticed, let alone appreciated. The results of these kinds of managerial tactics are predictable – employees have no sense of real connection with their boss, often feeling that he or she is out of touch with employees and what's really going on at work; they are unable to contribute their best thinking and talents; they are resentful and frustrated to work for such an ineffective and insensitive manager. This, of course, leads to a miserable, stressful, and strained workplace environment that is characterized by low morale and little employee motivation.

The way in which we approach our relationships at work has a profound impact on morale, motivation, performance, and results. Communication and feedback are the cornerstones for creating an environment of trust, respect, and collaboration. A study from the 1990's using exit interview data from Fortune 500 companies showed that the number one reason why employees left their jobs was due to little or no feedback from their manager about how they were doing at work. We're all aware of the literal cost of high turnover rates, which includes the expenses of recruiting and training new replacements. Add to it the "invisible" costs on morale, credibility, and productivity, and you can see the severe impact that a non-communicative manager can have on his or her company.

To his credit, Roger came to understand that his earlier approach to management created a dysfunctional team. His new attempt to make big changes can, if he continues to move forward, lead to an energized and motivated work team and increased productivity that translates into high quality performance and results. A primary tool in Roger's strategy is creating two-way feedback – being able and willing to *give* feedback responsibly to his employees so that they can learn and improve, and, just as important, being open to *receiving* feedback from employees so that he can do the same.

In fact, Roger went further and *encouraged* feedback by asking his employees to "coach" him by giving him feedback. An important question is, "How does one do that?" Getting feedback

from your staff can be challenging, even when you already have strong relationships with your staff members. In Roger's situation, his team members may think that giving him such feedback could be daunting indeed.

Creating a Clear Contract for Feedback

A critical part of your process to improve two-way feedback is to select and invite some of your staff to offer you periodic feedback about the area that you are working on. To accomplish this, you can actually create a contract with a few of your staff members to provide you with regular feedback on the important area of focus. Here's how to do it...

- Select two or three staff members to give you feedback. You may want to choose staff members who will be *willing*, and who have the *skill* to observe your behavior and put words to it.
- In one-on-one meetings, share the specific focus for which you are seeking feedback. Fill them in on the context of this change – why you are working on this; how it is important to your role; why it might be important to them; what you are hoping to achieve; and the impact you anticipate from hearing their observations and insights...
- Identify the specific behaviors you anticipate adding to your repertoire. But be honest. Let them know that this is new for you, as it is for them, and admit that you may trip over some of your attempts.
- Together, explore the various venues or opportunities in which they can observe you using your new skills.
- Be clear about the specific kind of feedback you want – such as, examples of what is working, what you "trip" over, how you might change your approach for further improvement, etc.
- Give them the opportunity to opt out. Don't put pressure on them; make it completely acceptable for them to choose or decline this new and potentially demanding agreement.
- If they accept your challenge, discuss in what form you want their feedback – written, verbal, email, or a combination.
- Set a specific time for them to report in with their feedback, such as every Friday at 2:00 o'clock. Don't simply ask them to "tell me when I do X or don't do x." You must make it *safe* for them to give you this feedback by committing the time and the venue.

Engaging Others in Your Development

In the long run, what does it really take to create a great feedback at work? The key is open communication, and a big piece of effective communication is using feedback as a tool for development, as a means of praising people, as a mechanism for continuous improvement, and as a method for nurturing and supporting your staff members.

How do I Begin?

To create a tone, an attitude, and a culture at work that encourages and motivates employees to give effective and valuable feedback, begin with self-awareness.

- Ask yourself some pointed questions, such as: “What are my strengths as a manager and how can I better utilize these strengths? What areas do I need to develop missing skills, change my patterns or attitudes, and set specific goals with respect to my management capabilities?”
- Meet with your employees frequently – make it a habit; make it part of your natural routine. Establish a periodic one-on-one with each employee. This is your opportunity to check in with each team member, hear about their concerns and progress, and be a needed resource for them.
- Praise, Praise, Praise! Take a positive step and catch your employees doing things right. Never miss the opportunity to pat them on the back! Notice when you point out quickly what employees are doing wrong – sometimes called a “hit and run” – and make it a point to turn curt criticism into a developmental feedback conversation.
- Engage your employees in their work and yours by sharing your vision of a project or your views on a task. Invite their perspective, too (this is easily done in one – on – one meetings). Also, consider and discuss with your staff, which decisions they can be involved in. What special tasks can you delegate to them as developmental opportunities? When does it make sense to ask for their opinion or incorporate their facts into your thinking?
- Invite and encourage them to give you feedback. Let them in on your goals and intentions. Invite, and again encourage, them to help you improve, and create a win for everyone.

Feedback in All Directions

Creating a safe environment for feedback demands conscious effort at work – not being on autopilot. A safe environment for feedback takes attention to detail, and paying attention to people. It takes authenticity and a willingness not only to give feedback but also to receive it. Receiving feedback is perhaps the most fruitful aspect of your personal change effort. With a little bit of time and focus, you’ll be on your way to creating and maintaining an environment at work in which feedback is easy, simple and natural. When feedback flows in *all* directions, you are on the road to your own development and to affecting positively your team’s effectiveness.