COMMUNICATION

Building a Feedback-Rich Culture

by Ed Batista

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As an executive coach and an experiential educator, I'm a passionate believer in the value of interpersonal feedback. To become more effective and fulfilled at work, people need a keen understanding of their impact on others and the extent to which they're achieving their goals in their working relationships. Direct feedback is the most efficient way for them to gather this information and learn from it.

But the form that most interpersonal feedback takes — a conversation between two people — can trick us into seeing it as a product of *the relationship* when it's equally (if not more so) a product of *the surrounding culture.* Even people who aren't interested in or skilled at giving or receiving feedback will participate in the process (and improve) when they're working in a feedback-rich environment. And the most ardent and capable feedback champions will give up if the organizational or team culture doesn't support their efforts.

So as leaders, how do we build a feedback-rich culture? What does it take to cultivate an ongoing commitment to interpersonal feedback? Here are four essential elements:

1. Safety and Trust

To give and receive truly candid feedback, people must feel a sense of safety and trust. Neurologist and educator Judy Willis emphasizes the relationship between positive emotion and performance, and as leaders we need to foster it to ensure that colleagues learn from feedback. Note that this does *not* mean avoiding confrontation or offering only support and comfort. It *does* mean being highly attuned to people's readiness for a challenge and their emotional state in a given interaction.

To create safety and trust:

- *Get to know each other.* Make an effort to understand colleagues as individuals. This doesn't require a great deal of time or deep, personal disclosures — just taking a moment to ask about someone's weekend and occasionally sharing stories of your own.
- *Talk about emotions.* The ability to discuss emotions is a critical feature in any group that aspires to share effective feedback, not only because feelings are at the heart of most difficult feedback, but also because feedback inevitably generates difficult feelings. When we can talk about our embarrassment, disappointment, frustration, and even anger, the culture is sufficiently safe — and robust — to handle real feedback.
- *Make it OK to say no.* A risk in feedback-rich cultures is that people feel obligated to say *"Of course,"* when asked, *"Can I give you some feedback?"* The freedom to postpone such conversations when we're not ready to have them ensures that when they do take place all participants are willing parties.

2. Balance

We often think that good feedback is honest criticism, but that's just half the story. The other half is truly meaningful positive feedback, which is all too often absent in organizations. You can't have one without the other, but so many obstacles prevent us from offering and accepting positive feedback. We worry it will sound insincere. We worry it is insincere. We worry it will make us look like suck-ups. We worry it will make us seem weak. And since we don't do it very often, we're not very good at it. But recent research at Ghent University in Belgium indicates that positive feedback promotes self-development. Further, as University of Washington psychologist John Gottman has noted in his study of long-term relationships, in the most successful ones the ratio of positive to negative interactions is 5:1 *even in the midst of a conflict*. Strong relationships *depend* on heartfelt positive feedback — so we need to practice.

To establish balance:

- *Offer some positive feedback...and stop there.* Too often we use positive feedback to cushion the blow before delivering criticism, but that practice inevitably degrades the value of our praise and renders it hollow
- *Start small.* We miss opportunities to provide positive feedback every day because we have this idea that only big wins merit discussion. When we see *any* behavior we want to encourage, we should acknowledge it and express some appreciation

- *Praise effort, not ability.* Research by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck suggests that praising persistent efforts, even in failed attempts, helps build resilience and determination, while praising talent and ability results in risk-aversion and heightened sensitivity to setbacks.

3. Normalcy

Trainings and workshops can create space for people to be open to new ideas and experiment with new ways of communicating, but the next day everyone goes back to the real world. You have to integrate the behaviors you want into your team's daily routines in order to normalize those behaviors within the organization's culture. If feedback is something that happens only at unusual times (such as a performance review or when something's gone wrong), it'll never really be an organic part of the organizational culture. It has to show up in everyday life — on a walk down the hallway, at the end of a meeting, over a cup of coffee.

To make feedback normal:
- *Don't wait for a special occasion.* A mentor of mine, Vince Stehle, once told me, "Don't build a castle; put up a thousand tents," and that certainly applies to feedback. Don't turn it into a complex, cumbersome process; just take a few minutes (or even a moment) and make it happen.
- *Work in public.* Certain conversations are best held one-on-one, but too often we treat all feedback as a potentially embarrassing or even shameful process to be conducted under cover of darkness. When sufficient safety and balance exist, even critical feedback can be provided in larger groups. This not only allows everyone present to learn from the issues under discussion but also allows people to see how to give and receive feedback more effectively.

4. Personal Accountability

As leaders who want to promote a feedback-rich culture, we have to walk the talk every day. Research by Harvard Business School's Lynn Paine and colleagues makes clear that employees are more sensitive than leaders to gaps between companies' espoused values and actual practices. Our teams will take their cues from us as to what's acceptable, and if we don't take some risks in this area, they won't either. Why should they? This doesn't mean we're going to get it right all the time. If we're taking some meaningful risks, then of course we'll make some mistakes. The key is to fail

forward and view those mistakes as essential learning opportunities. Let those around us know that we're trying to get better at giving and receiving feedback, too, and ask for their input on how we're doing.

To walk the talk:
- *Be transparent.* Everyone around us - colleagues, superiors, direct reports - should know that improving at giving and receiving feedback is an ongoing goal of ours
- *Ask.* We can't just sit back and wait for feedback to be offered, particularly when we're in a leadership role. If we want feedback to take root in the culture, we need to explicitly ask for it.
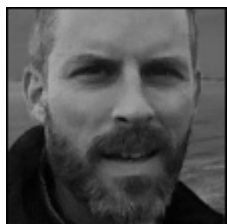
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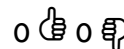
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Ellyn McKay   8 months ago

Very helpful article that I will pass along to at least one client. We have built a "strategy map" (BSC) and culture is a critical component - will recommend they add "feedback-rich culture" to their aspirational goals. Feedback - the breakfast of champions. Thanks! Ellyn

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