

## **Feedback *is* Professional Development**

By Stephen M. Dent

Are you conditioned to raise your defenses whenever the word “feedback” comes up?

How many times do people have to tell you something before you hear them? Once . . . three times . . . five times?

One of the biggest sources of professional and partnership development is a simple tool called feedback. The ability to hear what others are saying and determine the accuracy and relevancy of their feedback is a significant source of professional and partnership development and a critical leadership competency.

Departing Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Raymond D. Fowler, of the American Psychological Association, said this about feedback to his heir:

“Be open to feedback. A CEO should be evaluated on a regular basis. It's the best thing that can happen to a CEO because if you're failing, then you need to know about it.” He added that if you are getting high ratings, and someone says you're not doing a good job, then "they're off base and you have the data to prove it.”

With these statements, Dr. Fowler covered the critical aspects of understanding the importance of feedback. It defines for us, from another's perspective, what we are doing right and where we need to improve. It helps to mitigate our blind spot, something inherent in all human beings.

Yet many of us are conditioned to raise our defenses against feedback. Why?

### **The Problem with Feedback in the Workplace**

Starting in our childhood, when our parents reprimanded us, it was usually because we did something wrong. In school, our teachers and reports cards got us accustomed to a more formal style of feedback; sometimes it was negative.

In the work-world, the situation is often similarly negative. The traditional approach to providing workers with feedback (typically through formal employee performance-management systems) is based on a lose-lose approach: people don't want to hear about their weaknesses and others generally don't feel comfortable telling them.

Formal feedback loops generally don't even exist in most partnerships, alliances, or cross-functional relationships. In these important relationships, the best rely on meeting transactional objectives, and the quality of the relationship is based on the level of griping at alliance or cross-functional meetings.

It's no wonder we're reticent to hear feedback.

Yet, the lack of feedback causes a huge loss of institutional knowledge and creates a break in the communications loop that can debilitate an individual, partnership, or company.

This is especially true as younger workers come into the workforce. It is common knowledge in Human Resource circles that company loyalty tends to be short lived with people under 40 and retaining them is a challenge.

In addition to giving them access to professional development opportunities and showing an active interest in building their skills, Russell Lobsenz, Ph.D. of PerformaWorks in Raleigh, N.C. says, "Young workers expect a lot more feedback than their predecessors, and they want it immediately. They don't want to wait six months or a year for a formal appraisal."

### **Steps for Improving Feedback in the Workplace**

What can be done to increase the level of feedback passed back and forth in the workplace? I recommend taking the following six steps.

**1. Establish a culture of feedback.** Leadership must take responsibility to role-model healthy and effective methods of providing feedback. Employees and partners observe how leaders behave and mimic that behavior. Sound simplistic? It's not.

Many studies of both the animal kingdom and people show that when leaders exhibit a quality, others imitate that quality, hoping to find favor with the "boss." IBM's moniker "Big Blue" didn't come from the color of the logo but from the color of the suits founder Thomas Watson Sr. wore to work everyday . . . as did any aspiring manager at IBM.

**2. Incorporate feedback into routine activities.** Almost every business today has tried some form of open-session feedback forums. Brown-bag lunches and skip-level meetings are just a few techniques. They often last for a month or several months, but over time, they tend to run their course and vanish like steam on a freezing day. Why? People tend to either lose interest or are too busy to participate in these more formal activities.

Nevertheless, as managers interact with employees in day-to-day routines, they should collect and provide feedback regularly. Any personalized comment reinforcing or constructively offering alternatives to actions is attention showered on employees. People respond well to attention, even if it's an alternative suggestion to what they are doing.

**3. Ask questions.** Rather than wait for someone to offer feedback, an effective leader asks questions, thereby opening the door to receive feedback. “How is the development going?” “How is your relationship with department X’s team going?” “Do you have the resources you need to complete the project on time?” “Am I providing enough, the right, and timely information you need?”

Asking such questions sets the example and opens the door for responses. It also creates a great opportunity for a leader to practice effective feedback behaviors (see sidebar).

**4. Engage the 3Xs Rule.** Feedback often says more about the giver than about you, the receiver. This phenomenon occurs because feedback provides insight into the issues the feedback-giver has with you, and those issues often reside within the giver and have nothing at all to do with you. That is why I always invoke the three-times rule.

The first time I hear a piece of feedback, I thank the giver and tuck it away in my memory. The second time I hear the same piece of feedback from a different source, I listen a lot closer to what the person is saying. If I hear the same piece of feedback from a third party, I must decide if I am going to act on that feedback or not. This technique provides people with permission to not react immediately to feedback with a knee-jerk, defensive reaction; it gives them time to process the information they received and determine for themselves its relevancy.

**5. Starting a Culture of Feedback.** One of the most effective techniques in gathering feedback is initiating a formal feedback process to develop a baseline for development. The process might start with an anonymous feedback data-collection system, such as the 360° Partnering Quotient Assessment offered by Partnership Continuum, Inc.

### Delivering Effective Feedback

- **Be Direct** – Focus on the specific behavior (positive or constructive) and not the person
- **Be Timely** – Provide the feedback as quickly after the event as possible, once all parties are ready to hear it
- **Ask For Permission** – Ask for permission to provide feedback. It puts the control in the receiver’s hands and reduces defensiveness
- **Be Sensitive** – Remember you are giving feedback to a person, not a machine. Feedback is not intended to hurt, belittle, or demean another
- **Be Helpful** – Offer the other person suggestions; do not demand that the individual do something differently

The assessment allows an individual to gather input from teams, peers, bosses, and partners. It can also be tailored to collect data from customers, suppliers, and community members (along with internal sources), thereby richly broadening the impact and importance of the feedback. Using a safe and secure methodology, the assessment allows raters the freedom to provide honest and candid feedback. From that point, the assessed individual can determine what areas of improvement he or she would like to tackle. It is important however, to close the communication loop by setting goals around the feedback and continuing to ask for feedback on progress.

**6. Set Goals and Ask for Feedback.** Dean DeGroot, a Partnership Continuum consultant and licensed psychologist, cites a study by Keilty, Goldsmith & Company, documenting "The Impact of Direct Report Feedback and Follow-up on Leadership Effectiveness." The study validated the hypothesis that leaders who frequently ask direct reports for feedback about their progress on development goals are 95 percent more likely to be perceived as actually making progress on those goals.

The study involved over 8000 respondents from some of the largest US Corporations. Feedback works: when you inform people that you learned something new and are now going to try new actions, they tend to rate improvements in the new areas.

For instance, in this study, each leader was encouraged to:

1. Choose one to three goals
2. Develop an action plan for desired change
3. Dialogue with direct reports about areas for improvement along with the action plan

## Receiving Feedback

- **Listen** – Listen to what the other person has to say; there is no need to immediately react to feedback
- **Thank** – Thank the person for giving you feedback, even if you didn't like it. It opens the door for further discussions and creates an opportunity for you to think about the feedback you received
- **Say You'll Think About It** – Reacting to feedback immediately may put you on the defensive. Tell the feedback-giver you'll think about what the feedback you received and, if appropriate, you'll get back to the individual about it.
- **Think About It** – Remember the 3Xs Rule. Think about what the person told you. Have you heard it before? Is it relevant?
- **Develop a Plan** – If the feedback is based on something you'd like to change, put a plan in place and tell the person who gave you the feedback. Both of you win that way.

4. Ask direct reports for help in changing behavior
5. Follow up with direct reports to check progress and receive further feedback

Several months after these dialogues, direct reports were surveyed, with the following questions:

- How effective was the leader in reaching the goal?
- To what degree did the manager follow up on the initial dialogue about plans for improvement?

For those managers who responded and did a little follow-up, two-thirds of the leaders were viewed as more effective; those who did some follow-up were 89 percent more effective; and those who did frequent follow-up were 95 percent more effective.

Research conducted at several universities indicates not only that feedback enables managers to appear more effective but that, when people believe they are more effective, their level of competencies increase. Feedback is an important form of personal and professional development that when utilized, can increase your effectiveness in all aspects of your life.

## **Summary**

- (1) Feedback is important for personal and professional development.
- (2) Create an environment, or culture, of feedback by being open to giving and receiving feedback as well as role-modeling it to others.
- (3) Establish a formal benchmark on receiving feedback using a tool with anonymous feedback-givers. A highly effective tool is the 360° Partnering Quotient Assessment.
- (4) Feedback is not a “special” event. Incorporate it into your day-to-day activities; make it a part of your daily interaction.
- (5) Ask questions to prompt people to provide you with feedback.
- (6) Remember the 3Xs Rule. Do not over-react to feedback; make sure you first have an opportunity to process the information.
- (7) Set goals around the feedback you identify as important to you and then ask others how you’re progressing.

[Learn how the 360° Partnering Quotient Assessment can improve your feedback and partnering capabilities.](#)