# The High Cost of Not Listening to Employees

By Stephen M. Dent

One of our Partnership Continuum clients, a wireless communications company, wanted to acquire inroads into a segment market--the Millennium Generation (today's teenagers and college-age students). The company's marketing staff proposed marketing wireless services directly to the Millennials. The company's CEO, however, wouldn't listen to this approach. He said that the company should focus its marketing efforts on the young people's parents because he reasoned (without any empirical evidence to back him up) that they owned the credit cards that would pay for the services.

You may be able to guess what happened. The marketing staff was right. As a result, the company missed out on a valuable market segment. If the CEO had listened to the feedback from his employees instead of cutting them off, his company could have reaped significant new revenue.

## Don't Ignore Feedback

Businesses that habitually ignore feedback from their employees soon find themselves with unsatisfied clients, unmet production quotas, or outdated product designs. All of this is preventable by improving your self-disclosure and feedback skills, one of the Six Partnering Attributes™ of Smart Partners, which we teach.

The ability to actively use your self-disclosure and feedback skills is an excellent trust-building technique in your corporate culture. After all, clients and employees alike want to trust that your organization is doing the right thing. Otherwise, the business will experience failure.

### Receiving Feedback is a Learned Skill

There is a skill in receiving feedback. Try to view it as a gift that someone gives you. How you receive feedback will determine the environment you set up for future feedback. Try to receive it with an open mind. Remember that we each have blind spots about our own behavior. When you receive feedback, listen to what the other person is saying, then thank him or her for the feedback. He or she has just given you information. You don't need to act on it right away. Think about it. Ask yourself: Does this feedback fit me (or my organization) or not?

The following checklist will help you observe how well you receive feedback. Think back on a recent time when your partner or an employee gave feedback to you. Then consider the following questions. Answer each one "yes" or "no."

1. Were my partner's/employee's comments given with care?
2. Were my partner's comments focused on specific behavior?
3. Were my partner's/employee's comments given immediately?
4. Were my partner's/employee's comments delivered in an objective and nonjudgmental manner?
5. Were my partner's/employee's comments given directly to the person meant to receive them?
6. Were my partner's/employee's comments phrased with "I" statements?
7. Were my partner's/employee's comments excessive?

> NOTE: "I" statements or messages are a specific way of communicating one's needs, wants, and feelings. The key is to start each statement with "I," not "You." "You" too easily becomes an accusation or an order (e.g., "You never..." or "You should...") Using "I" statements forces one to focus on and communicate what's important (e.g., "I need..., I want...," "I feel...").

Next, take a moment to jot down your comments on each question (what you remember, why you feel the way you do about the feedback, what you learned from it, and what you might try the next time you receive feedback from that person).

Finally, ask yourself: What do I find to be the most challenging aspect of receiving feedback?

Self-disclosure and feedback, a component of the Six Partnering Attributes, are fundamental skills that transform relationships into partnerships, and they work together to form the partnering environment.

Once you've decided to form a partnership—whether it's internal with your employees or external with clients/customers and alliance groups—the first step to creating a successful partnering relationship is to assess your needs. Next, you must be able to describe what you want (your objectives) to your partner or employee; this is self-disclosure. Then you must be able to *listen* to your partner or employee describe how your needs or objectives affect him or her (feedback). Self-disclosure and feedback are the building-blocks of every successful internal and external partnership.

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