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Driving superior performance through exceptional leadership!

From The Fence in My Backyard

(A series of articles on Leadership and Organizational Development)



FEEDBACK, What Is It Good For? Absolutely Everything!

2014 Article #2 by Kevin Cullen

Point 1 – Even the best of us need and want feedback

“My psychiatrist told me I was crazy and I said I want a second opinion. He said okay, you're ugly too.” Rodney Dangerfield

Imagine for a moment that everyone had a “cosmic gauge” that was visible above their heads and looked like a word caption expressing a specific feeling or thought they have about you.

***“This guy is
killing me!”***



***“I love the way
she talks with
our customers.”***



***“Is that a hair
piece or his
real hair?”***



Like a billboard, that “cosmic gauge” would display others’ thoughts about you at that moment. I guess that could be real good or real bad. Either way you would see a variety of expressions:

- *“She is a great young lady and she always gets the job done properly.”*
- *“What is this moron screwing up now?”*
- *“I wish all of our employees had his focus and determination.”*
- *“I don’t think she is going to survive next month’s downsizing.”*
- *“He really did a great job handling that safety issue yesterday.”*
- *“I am so disappointed with the work he is doing, he never follows through.”*

I realize this is an unrealistic fantasy, but it **is** interesting to consider. With that scenario in mind, think about someone who is important to you: your spouse, your supervisor, your child, a co-worker, a close friend, an employee, etc. Do you know how they really feel about you and what you do? Is your sense inflated or is it on track? How do you know? Meaningful and dignified feedback is truly the key aspect of healthy and relevant relationships.

Ed Koch served as the 105th Mayor of New York City from 1978 – 1989. He was famously known for walking the streets of the city, approaching people and directly asking, *“How’m I doin’?”* I’m not sure if he sincerely wanted to get candid feedback or if he merely wanted to demonstrate that he cared. In any case, he reached out for feedback from the people he served.

Talking about feedback makes me think about competitive reality TV shows such as American Idol, The Voice, etc. Young people sing their hearts out on national TV and are critiqued by a few “professional” judges and millions of viewers. Some singers are devastated by negative feedback and others take it as a way to improve and often they do just that! Conversely, some of the young performers internalize the feedback, take it personally and seem to lose confidence.

KC’s perspective: We all need and want feedback whether we admit it or not. Feedback is good for absolutely everything, but it must be under the right set of circumstances such as:

- In the right tone,
- At the right time,
- With appropriate word choices, and
- From the right person.

Point 2 – Why is this relationship important to you?

“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.” C.G Jung

As we all know, we can categorize the various relationships in our lives under many “headings:”

Family	Friends	Work	Church	Neighborhood
Hobbies	Activities	School	Health	Etc.

Focus. The comedian Henny Youngman once said, *“God sneezed. I didn't know what to say to him!”* Do you know what to say to the people you lead? The type and amount of feedback we provide and receive depends on how a particular relationship fits into our lives. Having said that, why is it important to be in synch with our bosses, co-workers, those who we lead, our customers, vendors, competitors, etc? Effective feedback is important for each of us, our departments and the organizations we serve because it is virtually our *“fuel to success.”*

Structure. Many organizations have structured processes for providing periodic feedback. That usually includes specific guidelines for the timing, content, documentation and career implications. For example, it may be a monthly requirement to conduct formal coaching sessions based on specific criteria (usually metrics-based) and documented on a prescribed coaching form. Other organizations may tend to do this on a more “ad hoc” basis which can be nice in terms of maintaining an informal atmosphere. It could also be risky in that it may not be a high priority during busier times when performance feedback is crucial.

Formal Feedback. I advocate that regardless of the size and nature of your organization, there needs to be a “contract” that outlines when formal feedback takes place, how it takes place and what the professional implications are (e.g. promotions, pay raises, increased responsibilities, etc.). Employees relish a sense of predictability about getting their work-related “report cards” (performance reports). That removes the sting and provides them with two valuable things:

1. A sense of accomplishment based on the positive feedback they receive, and
2. A reciprocal sense of where they need to improve based on constructive feedback.

Our colleagues in the Human Resources (HR) field will tell us that this helps facilitate critical HR decisions because of clearly documented expectations combined with a crystal clear picture of whether employees exceeded, met or failed to meet those expectations.

Informal Feedback. The flipside to this is the equally important need for leaders to provide informal feedback. In the article I posted last month called *A Crazy Little Thing Called Leadership*, I made a distinction between Leading and Managing. A crucial part of leading is the ability to create an environment in which supervisors get out and about, observe performance, and provide on the spot feedback. In my consulting work, I encourage leaders in the organizations I serve to use Tom Peters' proven concept of MBWA - Managing By Wandering Around. Please check out this video link (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xo1ZWvtX_ZM) to hear Tom Peters' perspective on how he discovered that simple, but practical concept. My interpretation is that leaders need to periodically get off of their "duffs," see what is actually going on in their organizations and let people know how they feel about what they're accomplishing (or not accomplishing).

KC's perspective: Relationships are obviously important to us in all aspects of our lives and that certainly includes our professional relationships. Being successful at our jobs enables us to be dependable providers for the people we love and care about most. I personally take a ***"failure is not an option"*** approach when it comes to serving and providing for my family. One imperative to successful professional relationships is establishing and maintaining an ongoing level of rapport that enables effective and respectful two-communication with success in mind. ***It's good to know where you stand!***

Point 3 – The Courage to be Candid!

"Courage means to keep working a relationship, to continue seeking solutions, and to stay focused during stressful periods." Dennis Waitley

I just mentioned Tom Peters' concept of MBWA (Managing By Wandering Around). In the course of "wandering around" leaders need to be observant and somewhat purposeful. Although it is a great way for leaders to relax and enjoy interacting with their invaluable team members, they should be sure to observe, interact and provide informal feedback (positive and corrective) in a

nonthreatening way. MBWA provides great opportunities to *“catch people doing things right”* a phrase coined by Dr. Kenneth Blanchard in his landmark book *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*. It also provides an opportunity to tactfully “nudge” struggling employees in the right direction. Here are a few examples:

- (Positive) *“You did a great job handling that customer complaint on the phone. I really like how you asked what you could do to make it right.”*
- (Positive) *“Wow! The warehouse looks great! I see that you shifted the inventory and created a clearer path for our vans to enter and exit. The Safety Office is going to love you for that.”*
- (Corrective) In a private area you mention to an employee, *“Bob, I noticed that you didn’t thoroughly explain the work that was done when you were billing the customer on the way out. It’s important that you take time to do that so that they have a clear sense of the service we provided.”*
- (Corrective) Again in a private area, *“Sally, I noticed that you just took a smoke break out in the front of the store near the customer entrance area. As you know, we discourage smoking, but if you have to do it, please smoke in the private area we designated out of view of our customers. This helps us avoid a negative image.”*

Keep in mind that all of the above scenarios are based on specific expectations. Also keep in mind that the entire concept of effectively providing feedback is null and void if it is not based on specific and clearly communicated performance expectations. Another consideration is how the type of feedback (positive or negative) impacts people. I recently read an interesting article on the Harvard Business Review Blog Network called *Do You Need to Lighten Up or Toughen Up?* (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/03/do-you-need-to-lighten-up-or-toughen-up/>). I would encourage you to check it out. I would also encourage you to consider the question that the authors (Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman) present in the beginning of the article:

- Which has helped your career more?
 - Positive Feedback
 - Negative Feedback

I wish I was sitting with you right now enjoying cup of coffee or a glass of wine so we could talk face-to-face about your response. It really is a profound question and I think it again depends on

the circumstances in which the feedback (positive or negative) was shared. It seems easy to praise people, but leaders can fail at this by providing it too liberally and/or randomly with no substance or basis. What specifically did the employee do well and why is it important to the team? Conversely, most people seem to dread providing constructive feedback. The key is to establish solid relationships with the people we lead, communicate specific expectations and have the courage to be candid. It may be hard to believe, but people value constructive feedback from leaders they respect and trust. There is also a solid train of thought that attests that negative feedback may have a more profound impact on us than positive feedback. I am not sure what the answer is, but it is certainly worth thinking about.

Negativity Bias. Tony Schwartz wrote a very telling article in the New York Times on June 14, 2013 called *Overcoming Your Negativity Bias*. Here's an excerpt from the article:

"It's a phenomenon called 'negativity bias.' 'Over and over,' Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist, says, 'the mind reacts to bad things more quickly, strongly and persistently than to equivalent good things.' Or as Roy Baumeister, a fellow psychologist, puts it, 'It's evolutionarily adaptive for bad to be stronger than good.'"

KC's perspective: I believe this may be a question of both style and substance. Leaders must be able to consistently communicate what successful performance looks like as tangibly as possible. They also have to be vigilant in staying attuned to their team members' performance quantitatively and qualitatively by directly observing and watching the numbers. ***They also must establish a culture that includes authentically letting people know how they are doing and what the organizational impact of that performance is (good, bad and ugly) and do it with dignity and respect!***

Point 4 – Avoid Assumptions and Focus on Successful Outcomes!

"Assumptions are the termites of relationships." Henry Winkler

According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of **assume** is *"to think that something is true or probably true without knowing that it is true."* Mr. Henry Winkler (AKA "The Fonz") provided a very deep thought which I will repeat, *"Assumptions are the termites of relationships."* I could not agree more with Mr. Winkler. People make assumptions based on

their life's experiences, but they can lead to trouble and inappropriate responses to life's activities. In the context of this article – the workplace – assumptions can have a negative impact on successful performance outcomes. Please **do not** categorize me based on me being a Caucasian male of Irish descent who is from New York and retired from the military. **Do** take time to get to know me and discover what makes me unique.

In my research, I found two examples of the impact of perceptions, stereotypes and assumptions:

- **Example #1:** The company Learning Seed (www.learningseed.com) provides learning materials on: Life Skills, Food and Nutrition, Careers and Child Development. One of Learning Seed's product offerings is a film called *Them and Us* which my company uses with our clients who are trying to proactively deal with potentially damaging issues related to perceptions, assumptions and stereotypes. Here is an excerpt from their website used to describe the content of the film:

"Nice, reasonable people like us are 'we,' and strangers with weird beliefs are 'they.' This is how many of us see the world. But every 'us' is somebody else's 'them.' Those who hold hidden assumptions or stereotypes consider them recognition of reality, not a prejudice. A common reaction is 'you might be prejudiced,' but 'I'm a realist.' What is prejudice for 'them' is merely recognition of 'the way things are' for 'us.'"

I'd encourage you to check out a preview of the film (<http://www.learningseed.com/p-128-them-and-us.aspx>).

- **Example #2:** I also discovered an interesting article published by the National Health Service (NHS) Education for Scotland called *Bridging the Gap: A Health Inequalities Resource*. This excerpt comes from the sub-heading called *Stereotypes and Assumptions*. The article begins with this quote, *"Emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says: It's a girl."*

You could substitute Females with Asians, African-Americans, Elderly, Hispanics, etc. It continues by addressing stereotypical assumptions:

"Stereotyping assumes that:

- *people who 'belong' to a group will, for example: appear, behave, look, speak or sound like others from that group*

- *the values, norms, practices, behaviours and traditions associated with the group are shared by all members of the group, e.g. women are maternal, men don't show emotions*

KC's perspective: At the end of each day, we are in business to produce successful outcomes – get the job done! That can be defined in a variety of ways depending on the industry in which you make your living (e.g. education, manufacturing, retail, government, entertainment, travel, etc.). Leaders must have the ability to recognize each individual performer “under their leadership” for their own unique talents and contributions. The key is to try your very best to put aside your preconceived stereotypes and avoid assumptions that have evolved from your life’s experiences. Each individual is unique and leaders have an obligation to unleash that unique individual’s potentials and strengths to deliver successful performance outcomes.

Thank you for taking time to read this article. I hope you find value in it and I’d welcome any feedback you may have. The next article in the *From the Fence in my Backyard* series is called *Are You Motivated Enough!?* I will post it on May 1, 2014. Stay tuned! KC

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