

How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches

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REAL TIME FEEDBACK FOR BUSY LEADERS

Warning: *this issue contains ideas that may be hazardous to your leadership blind spots.*

According to leadership research, 70 percent of what we learn comes from on-the-job experience. People who elevate their leadership capacity do so by taking on challenging assignments that teach them the lessons they need to learn to guide their organizations into the future. And they learn--really learn--from those experiences.

How an individual best learns depends on many factors, but one practice that works well across the board is receiving specific, requested, ongoing and real-time feedback from a rich variety of competent observers. Such feedback allows leaders to see things they cannot see on their own, expand their perspective, gauge their progress in better leveraging their strengths and improving on their "Achilles Heel" weakness, and enroll others as allies. Let's break these words down:

- **Specific.** This means describing visibly observable behaviors. "You raised your voice and clenched your fists" is specific. "You got angry" is not. Such visible behaviors can include a person's words, body language, facial expression, tone of voice, etc. We can also distinguish "specific" feedback by its relevance to the particular areas a leader is focusing on developing. If someone is deliberately practicing how he explains the rationale behind decisions, getting feedback about this would be more useful than, say, how much he thanks people for their efforts.
- **Requested.** Most of us feel more comfortable giving our perspective when someone has asked for it and when we are confident they will listen to us, take our words seriously, and not argue with us. I encourage leaders to say something like this: "I'd like to get your feedback about how well I explain the rationale behind my decision in this afternoon's meeting. All I will do when you are giving the feedback is listen, take notes, and ask clarifying questions." To make this promise useful, you gotta follow through. No counter-arguments disguised as questions. And if you think you're going to frown, tell the other person up front, "It can be challenging to get feedback, so my face may frown or do other strange things in the moment, but know that my heart is with you and I'll take it very seriously." Breathing deeply and feeling your feet on the ground always helps.
- **Ongoing.** Far too many organizations rely on annual performance reviews to tell people how they're doing. Once a year, as many readers know, ain't enough. Particularly for people with seniority and power who can get caught in bubbles because the only people who feel safe giving them feedback, their bosses, are either too busy or not competent at doing so. How about this for a standard: getting feedback at least three times a week from three different sources.

- **Real-time.** When I shadow senior managers (follow them around and observe them in action), I like to give them feedback immediately after observing. The experience is fresh in their memory, and it's fresh in mind. I do this by contracting with them to have a conversation during the small "breaks" in the day. How to do this if you don't have a coach shadowing you? Ask a trusted colleague to observe a particular behavior during a particular meeting and then give you 60 seconds of feedback in the hallway afterwards or through a short email that same day.
- **Rich variety.** The leadership research suggests that feedback works best when it comes from multiple people who see you in a range of contexts. Someone working on how well they listen might ask a direct report at the end of a 30-minute one-on-one meeting, "How well do you think I listened to you in this meeting? What could I do better?" Notice how different this is from asking a peer to provide feedback on one's listening behaviors in a wide-ranging strategic discussion involving twenty people.
- **Competent observers.** I've conducted hundreds of 360 degree interviews over the years, and I can say with confidence that some people are much more skillful at observing people than others. I like to ask, "Can you give me a specific example of what they did or said? Can you tell me what you observed on their face or in their body language?" Some people provide nuanced details. Others have difficulty providing anything beyond vague adjectives. Many are in between. This makes it difficult to find competent observers, but some are better than none.

Send your comments and questions to the usual place.

Cheers,

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