

*n*SIGHTS

Person(nel) Development Resources

Survival of the Fittest:

Feedback is not for Sissies

"It is not the most intelligent of the species that survive the longest, it is the most adaptable." -- Charles Darwin

In order to be persistently successful, people and organizations need to adapt continually to their environment. This requires information from the environment. The more active and open the feedback loops, the more effective the adaptation and change can be. However, few leaders have truly open and honest feedback within their organizations.

***CEO disease:** not seeing the impact a leader's mood has on the organization. **Symptom:** when the leader has near-total ignorance about how his or her mood and actions appear to the organization.*

The term "CEO disease" comes from the book *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee (Harvard Business School Press 2002). The term was originally coined in an article in *Business Week* by John Byrne in 1991.

The higher up in an organization a leader goes, the less accurate his self-assessment is likely to be. The problem is a lack of candid feedback.

As one CEO expressed it, "I can't put my finger on it, because no one is actually lying to me. But I can sense that people are hiding information, or camouflaging key facts, so I won't notice...they aren't telling me everything I need to know."

Sometimes there is fear in sharing information due to a leader's commanding or pacesetting style. People do not want to be shot as the messenger. Many subordinates and peers want to appear upbeat and optimistic and do not want to be the one to rock the boat by delivering negative information. Whatever the motives, the result is a leader who only has partial information about what's going on around him.

This may be true for other leaders within the organization, not only for the CEO. There is a natural instinct to please the boss, resulting in a widespread tendency to give positive feedback whenever information flows upward.

Lack of reliable feedback at the top

The problem is compounded when the leader is a woman or from a minority group. Women in general get less useful feedback about their performance in any position than do men. Similar studies show this to be true for Chinese and Indian executives as well.

Executives are often unaware of this dynamic. Many believe they are attuned to their environment because they

ask questions and solicit feedback. They believe they are getting the truth. But people have difficulty delivering the complete truth when the message is less than favorable. And the more personal the message, the less chance it has of getting delivered at all.

Top executives typically get the least reliable information about how they are doing. A meta-analysis of 177 separate studies that assessed 28,000 managers found that performance feedback becomes more inconsistent the higher the person's position.

Often the reason is simply that it makes people uncomfortable to be candid. They don't know how to be frank without risking injury or backlash. Few people want to inten-

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tionally hurt another person's feelings, and they certainly don't want to be misinterpreted and accused of trying to do harm. Often silence is chosen rather than risk. People swing too far in the direction of "being nice" rather than being useful and providing accurate observations about behavior.

When people avoid giving honest feedback by sanitizing it to keep up comfort levels, they are actually doing a disservice. They are depriving their own leaders of valuable information.

Successful leaders seek out negative feedback

Emotionally intelligent leaders will actively seek out negative feedback as well as positive. They understand they need a full range of information to perform better, whether it makes them comfortable or not.

How should leaders seek out the truth then? It is clear that it is up to leaders to actively cultivate feedback if they are to have the information they need to make changes and to adapt to the environment. Rare are those people who will dare tell a strong leader he or she is coming across as too commanding or harsh. People generally won't stand up and let a leader know he could be more visionary or more democratic.

A study of 400 executives shows that the most effective leaders actively seek negative feedback. They let it be known that they are open to receive critiques either of their ideas or their leadership. The least successful executives most often solicit confirming feedback.

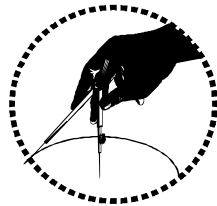
Using 360-degree assessments

The 360-degree assessment method offers a fuller picture for anyone wanting to develop a plan for improvement. Asking input of many people, subordinates, colleagues, superiors, peers and even family members can offer multiple perspectives. This multiple perspective is designed to give a fuller picture of the "real" person. How accurate this is depends on 1) whether the respondents interact regularly with the person and 2) whether the person reveals himself to others.

Since a person can be different with each person, it is important that many respondents be involved. An overall consensus is then derived. Interestingly, one study shows that subordinates and peers are more predictive of a leader's success than their boss. In this study of the effectiveness of leaders in a government agency, how subordinates assessed the leader proved most predictive of the leader's success and effectiveness both two and four years following the assessment. Even after seven years, the subordinates' assessments were predicting the leader's success with far more accuracy than the boss's own assessments.

Looking at the gap between ideal and real

Once the feedback is received, there exists the problem of looking at the difference between the ideal self and the real self. Looking at this gap often leads to defensiveness. Since the drive to achieve is particularly strong in a leader, an em-



Feedback That Works

One of the most effective models of delivering feedback is set forth in a small handbook, *Feedback that Works* by Sloan Weitzel, published by the Center for Creative Leadership, 2000. There is a three-step process in delivering effective feedback:

1. Capture the situation
2. Describe the behavior
3. Describe the impact the behavior had on you

Capture the situation: In the first step of the process, you must be specific as to what happened, when it happened and the context. The more specific you can be the better. Refrain from adding any judgmental statements. Be as neutral as possible, avoiding words that might trigger defensiveness. The idea here is to recall the event.

Describe the behavior: In this crucial step, you must give information about what behavior needs to stop or continue in order to improve performance. Avoid using adjectives that describe the person, and instead use words that describe the person's *actions*. The more observable behaviors that can be described the better, since you are presenting facts here, not interpretations. It is important to capture not only what people do, but how they are doing it. This requires keen observational skills in order to describe nonverbal communication and body language.

Deliver the impact: In the final step, you must focus on the impact of the behavior on you. This is not where you communicate what the impact may have on the organization or on other people. When you interpret and make a judgment about the behavior, you are less effective because the person can become defensive and argue with your interpretation. When you deliver the impact it had on you, it is harder for the person to dismiss your personal experience and it is more likely they will hear what you've said. You are sharing your personal point of view and asking the other person to view their behavior from your perspective. This kind of sharing can build trust and lead to honest sharing.

Feedback needs to be clear, specific, candid and concise. It should not be judgmental (good/bad), blaming (fault/scapegoating), or come from right/wrong thinking. If delivered in any of these modes, it will trigger either active or passive defensiveness.

These steps are valuable for both positive and negative feedback. Perhaps the best way to begin the practice of effective feedback is to start with positive messages. One message should be delivered at a time, however, to avoid the sandwich effect. When negative feedback is sandwiched in between two positive messages, it is less effective because the positive messages never get heard. This may be perceived as manipulative and insincere and does nothing to build trust.

phasis on gaps often arouses feelings of anxiety and defensiveness. And once defensiveness sets in, it typically demotivates rather than motivates. This results in an interruption in learning. And when self-directed learning stops, there is little chance for change.

It is exactly this mechanism of defensiveness that is behind the problem of giving feedback. When one is candid, there is the risk of triggering emotions of defensiveness in the boss. Once a person is defensive, all of his or her energy goes into defending rather than looking at possibilities.

Leadership development programs sometime train how to give effective feedback, but it is rare that an individual becomes really adept at this. Leaders can teach people how to communicate with them by modeling and setting examples. A leader who gives effective feedback smoothly and frequently sets the tone for how one should reciprocate.

A review of effective feedback basics is set forth here to help both leaders and those they lead to navigate this important communication model.

Seeking out learning opportunities and practice

Effective feedback is only part of the informational sources necessary for the continual change and adaptation of successful leaders. Almost all successful leaders are adept at self-assessment and seek out self-directed learning. Staying mindful of learning opportunities when they arise and spontaneously seizing them is a hallmark of the emotionally intelligent leader.



CEO's who practice new abilities as they become aware of them are rare. Great athletes spend enormous amounts of time practicing and only a little time actually performing. CEO's spend most of their time performing. In the drive to achieve and compete, there is no time to practice.

To master a leadership skill, there must be a change in the brain's default operations. Old habits must be broken down and new ones learned. This requires an extended period of practice in order to create new neuronal pathways in the brain and then to strengthen them to the point of habit or mastery.

Executives who work intensely with an executive coach trained in the emotional competencies for successful leadership understand how much effort this can take. Managing emotional impulses is real mental work. The stress of the intentional effort to alter one's mood can deplete the energy required for self-control. Self-control is exactly what is needed when practicing a new leadership style.

Executive coaches use learning strategies that involve a commitment to continual feedback from selected stakeholders. The executive must commit to and publicly identify the behaviors they want to work on. They must commit to dialoguing with each person in the group of selected stakeholders. The executive must be open to receiving feedback about his or her behavior. This method of including others into the coaching strategy is seen as an important element in creating effective change in leaders.

What inhibits growth and innovation, both personally and in organizations, is an attachment to one's self and what has worked in the past. In order to survive in a rapidly changing environment, executives must continually update what is

working. Without feedback and particularly without sending the message that one is receptive to feedback, there is no new information for making adjustments. There can be little adaptation and change.

The problem lies in resistance. Most people fear negative feedback and will not actively seek it out. They may feel that they can't change anyway, that their ways are too ingrained. Research on learning supports the view that the emotional competencies required for successful leadership can be learned. It requires bravery to face the opinions of subordinates, but high achievers do not shrink from tasks simply because they are new or uncomfortable. Receiving feedback is definitely not for sissies.

Receptivity to feedback is clearly an important gateway to learning and practicing strategies for personal improvement. Staying out of defensive modes is essential to moving on and practicing new behaviors. These strategies are not easy and work best when guided by an experienced coach. Unless leaders get data about the quality and effectiveness of their interactions, they become prisoners of the status quo.

Leadership Styles in a Nutshell

From *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*

Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee

Harvard Business School Press 2002



Resonance occurs in organizations not only as a result of leaders' good moods and ability to say the right thing, but also from sets of activities that distinguish a particular leadership style. The most effective leaders act according to one or more of six distinct approaches to leadership. The most effective leaders are able to discern which style to use in a situation and switch skillfully and flexibly according to organizational needs.

VISIONARY

How it builds resonance:

Moves people toward shared dreams

Impact on Climate:

Most strongly positive

When appropriate:

When changes require a new vision or when a clear direction is needed

COACHING

How it builds resonance:

Connects what a person wants with the organization's goals

Impact on Climate:

Highly positive

When appropriate:

To help an employee improve performance by building long-term capabilities

AFFILIATIVE

How it builds resonance:

Creates harmony by connecting people to each other

Impact on Climate:

Positive

When appropriate:

To heal rifts in a team, motivate during stressful times, or strengthen connections

DEMOCRATIC

How it builds resonance:

Values people's input and gets commitment through participation

Impact on Climate:

Positive

When appropriate:

To build buy-in or consensus, or to get valuable input from employees

PACESETTING

How it builds resonance:

Meets challenging and exciting goals

Impact on Climate:

Because too frequently poorly executed, often highly negative

When appropriate:

To get high-quality results from a motivated and competent team

COMMANDING

How it builds resonance:

Soothes fears by giving clear direction in an emergency

Impact on Climate:

Because so often misused, highly negative

When appropriate:

In a crisis, to kick-start a turnaround, or with problem employees



Resources for June 2002 Issue:

“Survival of the Fittest -- Feedback is not for sissies”

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Contact us:
(248) 683-1068
info@4nsights.com
www.4nsights.com
The V V Group, Inc