

The GREYSTONE MANNER

A Newsletter of The Greystone Consulting Group, Inc - Spring 2007

“Feedback is Not for Sissies”

For well over a decade now I've been consulting with groups of people, large and small, from non-profits to Fortune 500s to help them address their various conflicts and issues. During this span I've used just about every natural tool and talent I have as well as those that I was taught in grad school and on the job. What I've discovered from the post-evaluations, is that repeatedly the biggest, SUSTAINABLE impact has been the intense work we do together on Temperament and Feedback.

So, when clients ask me to come and explore solutions with them— I can assure them, that if they don't do anything else, - the biggest “**bang for the buck**” is always in teaching these fundamental skills. This experiential training allows them to understand themselves and those around them, and to then be able to give feedback to those same people about how their actions impact others. Cutting to the core, it's about how we deal with others, and how well we understand ourselves.

When I ended my first career as a senior manager and supervisor in the scientific/engineering community, I remember telling my wife (and anyone else who would listen) that my bottom line learning from those 30 plus years of work, was that “the root of nearly all of an organization's problems are people problems NOT process problems.” Perhaps that's why Temperament and Feedback are so powerful and valuable to folks and why I'm called back so often to perform and inform on those topics. So, let's take some time to look at feedback in more detail.

In order to be persistently successful, people and organizations need to understand and constantly adapt to their environment. This requires accessing information from that environment. Information that we're most often either blind to or is hidden from us. Only when this information is consciously moved into the open or public arena can we have trusting, creative, and truly communicative organizations. The more active and open the feedback loops - the more we're fully effective and adaptive to change. Few individuals have truly open and honest feedback systems within their organizations. Nor do they aggressively seek feedback themselves. “**CEO disease**”, that is a leader not being able to see the impact a their mood has on their organization runs rampant in most of the organizations that engage us in consulting activities.

A Letter from the President



This newsletter on Feedback is fairly didactic and will not be as powerful as our workshop; but I hope it will be informative, and both peak your interest and have you wanting to know more. For those of you who have attended our experiential workshop it should be a good reference resource on the topic.

In future issues I will address topics such as Temperament, What Makes an Effective, and Sustainable Leadership Program, Facing Conflict, and the Four Fatal Fears. If you have a preference for what should come next, give me a call...

cheers, jim

<http://www.greystoneconsulting.org>

The higher up in an organization a leader goes, the less accurate their 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 style. Who among us wants 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 potentially negative information. Often the reason is simply that it makes people afraid to be candid. They don't know how to be frank without risking injury or backlash. Few people want to intentionally 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. Whatever the motives, the result is that most leaders only have partial information about what's going on around them.

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.

**Feed
back**

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 when I worked with Navy Captains who were being promoted to flag rank, I would warn them that when they wore the star that it might be the last time anyone told them the unvarnished truth.

This is true for others within the organization, not only for the CEO. The term, originally coined in an article in Business Week by John Byrne in 1991, could just as easily be termed "**co-worker disease**". This natural instinct to please others, not just the boss, often results in a widespread tendency to give feedback only if the giver sees the information as positive.

When people avoid giving honest feedback, by sanitizing it to keep up comfort levels, they are actually doing a disservice- to themselves and their colleagues. The root cause is FEAR. There are countless types of fears, and all of them show up at the work place. Four deep fears keep us from both from being trusted colleagues and from giving and receiving feedback. These fears impede our ability to interact effectively with others and being proactive; and make us focus on controlling others rather than managing ourselves. Psychologist Maxie Maultsby proposed that these "**Four Fatal Fears**" cannot only immobilize us, but also immobilize an entire organization when leaders are stuck in their grip. Emotionally intelligent leaders will actively seek feedback. They don't attempt to "categorize" feedback into "negative and positive". They understand they need a full range of information to perform better, whether it makes them comfortable or not. They don't worry about categorizing the content.

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.

*The only thing we
have to fear is fear
itself.*

- FDR

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.

If one person gives us constructive feedback that’s hard to swallow, we tend to dismiss it as an anomaly. But, if several people give us that same feedback, it’s much harder to dismiss. An overall consensus needs to be collected. Interestingly, one study shows that subordinates 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 assessment.

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, an emphasis on gaps often arouses feelings of anxiety and fear. It also directly engages the four fatal fears. And once defensiveness sets in, it typically de-motivates 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. Once a person is defensive, all of his or her energy goes into defending rather than looking at possibilities.

Seeking out learning opportunities and practice

Leadership development programs sometimes train how to give effective feedback, but it is rare that an individual becomes really adept at this. Soliciting, giving, and receiving feedback is a practiced skill. This skill can be developed after we have conquered the fear that gets in the way.

THE GREYSTONE CONSULTING GROUP, INC. can teach you the methods for providing honest, respectful, and timely feedback. We tackle the topic by modeling the correct techniques for giving and receiving feedback and then letting you practice it in a safe environment. We’ll teach you the guidelines and ground rules for giving feedback that others will pay attention to. You will come to understand and learn how to overcome the barriers to feedback and, hopefully; stay continuously mindful of the precious learning opportunities to use these new skills. More information about this course is available on our website. Individuals 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. All employees spend most of their time performing. In the drive to achieve and compete, there is no time to practice. You need to TAKE THE TIME. 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 centipede may be perfectly happy without awareness, but after all, he restricts himself to crawling under rocks.

-Joe Luft

Yanni,
Yanni,
Yanni...



What did they say when you told them that?

-Jim Harden



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*Facilitating Self-Awareness,
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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, all employees, including their 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 that is created by those fears. Many convince themselves 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 others, but high achievers do not shrink from tasks simply because they are new or uncomfortable. 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. Unless leaders get data about the quality and effectiveness of their interactions, they become prisoners of the status quo.

***Giving and receiving feedback is definitely
not for sissies.***