Feedback is a gift: learn to make it meaningful

Far too many leaders waste the opportunity to help others by offering meaningful feedback. Instead they say things meant to offer encouragement or express disappointment, but steer away from concrete examples that one can use to actually change things. As a leader, you have several responsibilities regarding feedback. You have responsibilities to help your employees do their part AND to help them learn and grow. You also need to be able to provide meaningful input "up" the chain-of-command, especially when invited. Lastly, you have a responsibility to receive feedback and act on it.

My system for providing sound feedback has three simple tenets:
- Start with the right mindset
- Focus on behaviors and be cautious with assumptions
- Link behaviors to impacts

Mindset. First, think about the purpose of the feedback you are going to provide and use that purpose to guide your observations and potential recommendations. I also recommend that you think about the audience. Your style will probably be different for a boss, a peer, a client, and an employee. Most importantly, your mindset should be positive: you intend to be helpful rather than hurtful. This positive mindset even applies if you are firing a sub-standard performer: your comments should be guided by helping that person to learn and improve.

Behaviors. Second, try to focus on behaviors, but be careful with your own assumptions about what is causing what you can observe. It's fine to say "you are frequently late to our morning meeting." A bad assumption would be "you are late because you have no discipline." Instead, try asking a question to better understand what is leading to the behavior: "Is there something happening that is causing you to be late?" You may learn that your employee is a sole parent and the day care center does not open until 15 minutes prior to the meeting. Or you may learn that your employee came from a job where timeliness was not important and has no idea how that behavior impacts the rest of the team. Lastly, try to focus on behaviors that one can control. It's fine to say: "Your appearance is not professional. We don't wear jeans and cowboy boots in the workplace." But it's not OK to say: "Change your accent. Our company is not based in New England."

Impacts. Your feedback can often have a stronger effect if you tie impacts to the observed behavior. "The slides you used in your presentation were too busy and cluttered" is fine, but consider the difference with this statement: "The slides you used in your presentation were so busy and cluttered that I had trouble following you, got distracted, and completely missed your major recommendation." Here is another example: "I've noticed that you are frequently typing on your phone when we're discussing important business. I'm not sure what is behind it but that makes me feel like you either don't care or don't respect what we are doing." I said that one time and discovered that the person was using the phone to take notes. All was OK because the impact focused on how I felt rather than leaping to a conclusion like "you don't care." In this case, the

feedback helped both of us. I learned to be extra careful with assumptions and he learned to offer a PSA at the start of our meetings that he was using his phone to take notes so that dinosaurs like me would not be offended.

Effective leaders also strive to get the most out of the input they receive. Feedback can come from nearly any source including your boss (in the forms of a performance review or informal counseling), employees, peers, clients, competitors, etc.   As with giving effective feedback, my suggested system for receiving it is simple and has several parts:

- Mindset
- Active listening
- Express thanks
- Decide what to do and act

Mindset. Start with a spirit of humility. This is pretty easy unless you are arrogant and assume that you are the smartest person in any room. A humble leader listens to others and strives to learn. If you want to get the most out of feedback, you also need to be vulnerable. Otherwise, you could act defensively. Defensive leaders resist learning and shut down additional feedback.

Practice active listening (even if reading a comment out of a suggestion box). Try to put yourself in the writer or speaker's place to better understand their input. Listen to understand rather than respond: ask questions to gain clarification but be careful with explaining your actions or defending them. Resist complete dismissal of what you learn if the source is overly negative or hurtful. There could be a gem hidden in complaints or attacks but you need to focus if you are going to discover it.

Thank the provider and mean it.

Decide what to do with what you learned. Regardless of what you choose to do, it should be a deliberate decision. Sometimes you can change something on the spot, or conversely, you may decide that the conditions needed for change are not yet fully developed. You may even decide not to make any change at all. Regardless of your choice, act on it and follow through. Consider making your actions visible to others—that positive reinforcement can help build the culture of a learning organization. As a leader, your actions count a heck of a lot more than your words. If you solicit feedback but shut down a subordinate who has the courage to provide it, you may have just shut it down for good.

Great leaders are good at both providing feedback and receiving it. They help the organization perform, enhance others' learning, and maximize their own growth. Feedback is a gift—learn to treasure it!