

Feedback ... some food for thought



by Kriss Will

It is not always easy to listen to and truly understand feedback about your performance, yet we know that we have much to learn by listening to the informed comments from those who work with us.

This column is intended to provide some guidance to those who are receiving feedback. You may like to copy it and include it as part of any formal or informal feedback process you employ in your office. In my consultancy, I provide these types of tips as part of training to those partners who are giving feedback. It also ensures they are ready to receive any feedback that may be provided during a performance discussion with an employee, and it helps employees who are going to be receiving feedback from partners and managers.

For the purposes of this column, I will discuss receiving feedback in a structured setting; that is, where a meeting time has been set with the known purpose of discussing actual performance compared with expected performance. I am not dealing with feedback that is given on the spot in anger. If feedback is provided in a flash of anger, I believe it is often best to say to the person that you will consider the information and come back and see them. Acknowledge the issue and walk away.

On-the-spot feedback motivated by anger is unlikely to be as valuable as a more considered approach. The issues may be the same, but the delivery will be more effective. People receiving feedback that is delivered in anger tend to remember the anger rather than the message. I hope these tips help.

■ **Pay attention to the speaker and listen to the message.** Listen actively. Make eye contact. Show you understand by saying so, asking questions or nodding. You may find that you cannot make eye contact as you are feeling too vulnerable. If this is the case, it may help you to take some notes so that you can show you are paying attention, even if you find it too confronting to look at the person.

■ **Try not to react by becoming defensive or launching a counter-attack.** Often people will be taken aback when they hear negative statements about their performance and this can lead to a person feeling under threat. This is the activation of the flight-fight response; people want to run away to protect themselves, or people want to fight to protect themselves. People under threat can act more aggressively than normal. If you feel like this, remember, it is okay to ask for some time to consider the feedback before you respond, and this should help you calm down so you can respond in a professional manner. If you find yourself feeling very threatened, you may like to ask if you can leave the room to get a glass of water. The short break will allow you to take some deep breaths to counter the anger you are feeling.

■ **Avoid flippancy or attempts to change the subject.** The person giving you feedback will usually not respond well to this type of deflective behaviour. They are taking the time to assist with your learning, and expect you to be attentive.

■ **If you are not sure what the speaker is trying to communicate, say so and ask questions to clarify your understanding.** It is important that you really understand what someone is trying to communicate to you when they are giving feedback. Sometimes it takes the speaker some time to get to the 'real' point of the discussion. Listening and asking questions usually makes for a more valuable feedback session.

■ **Do not exaggerate the criticism by overreacting.** Again, listen and wait until everything has been said. Take notes if you like. Paraphrase what you have understood as the key points to ensure you have understood them. Feel free to ask for a summary at the end of the discussion to ensure you have not misunderstood the intent of the feedback.

■ **Do not infer that the critic has some ulterior, hostile motive.** It is difficult for some people to give you feedback, and it will only be made more difficult if you do believe the person is 'out to get you'. For many people, providing negative feedback to staff is one of the most difficult responsibilities they have.

Listen and respond on the basis that the person has positive intentions.

■ **Accept praise graciously – don't deny it.** Thank people for praise.

Do not dismiss it just because negative feedback has been given at the same time. We are all good at some things, and could be better at others. It is important to take on board the positive as well as the possible areas of improvement.

■ **Convey to the other person that you understand the point of the criticism, and indicate a willingness to work together toward a solution or improvement.** Show you are taking part in the feedback discussion by asking probing questions to ensure your understanding, and try to think of how to improve the situation.

Improvement may depend on others behaving differently; for example, a supervising partner having more time to discuss a file before you start work on it so you provide a better first draft.

■ **Establish an agreement on what is going to happen next, even if this is only that you will come back to them once you have considered their viewpoints.**

Do not leave before the next step is decided. The next step may be working through possible solutions or actions and you may feel able to do this immediately, or you may like to ask for time to consider what has been said and then a follow-up time can be scheduled.

■ **Deal with the follow-up to a feedback discussion in a professional manner.** Do not undermine the person who has given you feedback to your colleagues even if they may not have been perfect in the delivery of what they had to say. Leaving a meeting and discussing your 'side' of the story with others in the office is likely to be detrimental as your comments are likely to become part of the office gossip.

In the next issue, I will provide tips on giving feedback in your practices. ■

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