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Use a Coaching Approach to Improve Feedback

In today's challenging environment, managers need to be more coach-like when working with their direct reports. They need, at fast pace to develop new capabilities around coaching for performance, coaching for development, and coach to build skills for results. The managers we work with through our SI II and coaching skills programs develop quickly in all three of these areas. An aspect of managing using coaching concepts is a big challenge, at this time for most people we work with—giving feedback and challenging conversations.

Why Is Giving Feedback So Challenging?

In studying this issue, we've found that there are three primary reasons why managers find delivering feedback to be difficult. Managers are

- afraid to de-motivate people who drive results, as they want to retain
- worried about damaging the relationship or challenging people
- concerned that the feedback will not generate the desired results

To help managers get past these fears and develop the skills they need to succeed, The Ken Blanchard Companies® approach to better feedback begins by reminding participants of the importance of keeping the development of people and the desired results in mind at the same time.

This means that managers looking to improve their feedback skills must commit to shifting their thinking so that they are

- Aware of style differences and choosing the best language when speaking with team members or direct reports
- Clear about their own judgements and can keep these separate from the job requirements and best interests of the team member or direct report
- Always working to increase trust in the relationship

Successfully accomplishing this allows managers to share delicate or difficult feedback because they have already built awareness, trust, and respect into the relationship, so it is good to have open conversations.

Crucial Distinctions When Giving Feedback

Delivering feedback well begins by identifying your desired outcome from the feedback session. Typically, there are three types of outcomes that correspond to three different types of feedback.

1. Informative feedback—This is information for the person's awareness and/or growth. This type of feedback is optional and at the employee's discretion to implement. The manager asks for permission to share this kind of feedback and should expect no specific outcome from sharing this.

Example: "You might make more of an impact if you used your voice more powerfully in your presentations."

2. Feedback that includes a request—This is information that would benefit the person, but it is not a demand. The manager gives feedback and makes a request—but it is clearly a suggestion and negotiable.

Example: "You might make more of an impact if you use your voice more powerfully. Would you be willing to practice with me before the next presentation to the committee?"

3. Feedback that addresses a requirement and/or demand—This is information about something that is considered part of the job and needs immediate attention.

Example: "The presentation to the board has to be flawless. Your presentation is not quite as powerful as it needs to be. You need coaching and practice, let's figure out how to make it happen right away."

Guidelines for Giving Feedback

In addition to identifying what type of outcome is desired, a manager also has to be aware of several other best practice keys to feedback success.

- Before giving feedback, be sure that there were clear agreements about goals, norms, roles, and expectations established.
- Make sure that the relationship has sufficient trust. Ask for permission to give feedback, or at least prepare the direct report if you need to share something that might be delicate or hard to hear.
- Use a neutral demeanour to eliminate blame and judgement. Be aware of your nonverbal communication and tone. Practice using neutral language if this is a challenge.
- Be timely and give feedback immediately or as quickly as possible, but not in the heat of the moment. If you cannot control your emotions, wait until you can before giving feedback.
- Be relevant. Feedback needs to be focused on moving forward, not about something in past that will never happen again. Giving feedback about past events which are unlikely to recur serves no purpose and can damage trust.
- Focus on behaviours that are within the employee's control. Beating people up for things outside of their control is unreasonable.
- Be specific and descriptive. Describe the behaviours or data rather than giving generalisations. Do not drag in third-party observations and do not give into demands for "what other people think." Remember you are the manager, and what matters is what you think.
- Be open and ready for a variety of outcomes. If you are just giving feedback to be helpful, don't expect gratitude or enthusiasm. If there is a request, hopefully, the feedback will be received and acted upon. If so, pay attention to efforts and be ready to endorse and praise. If there is a demand and/or requirement that needs to be acted upon, be ready to work with the person to ensure compliance. Be ready to discuss structure (when and how they will do what is needed), accountability (how you and others will know they are on track) and support (how you and others can help). Finally, be ready to follow up with consequences for failure.

Feedback Doesn't Have to Be Scary

Giving feedback is a critical job responsibility of any manager. It doesn't have to be scary, and with some practice using a coaching style approach it will get less uncomfortable. Remember that as a manager you earn the right to give feedback by building trust and respect. Then you must be crystal clear on your motives for giving feedback and what you want to achieve. The good news is that the more thoughtful you are with feedback, the less of it you'll have to give and the more you'll feel free in having challenging conversations!

"Delivering feedback well begins by identifying your desired outcome"