Gain Without Pain: Who Said Feedback Has to Hurt?

By Sandy Mobley

Organizations tout the merits of managers providing feedback to employees. Human Resource programs offer tools to ensure feedback happens, whether through annual performance evaluations, 360° assessments, or management review of employees' work products. But, as much as the procedures and forms are designed to facilitate meaningful conversations, few managers and even fewer employees are happy with them.

A study by People IQ, a performance management company, found that a mere 13 percent of employees and managers and 6 percent of CEOs think their organization's performance appraisal process is useful. Employees complain about managers who don't give feedback but seem mystified when the employees' behaviors don't change. On the other hand, managers complain that feedback doesn't make a dent in the performance of some underachieving employees. Could it be that employees are neither lazy nor resistant? Could it be the feedback loop is broken? Whether the fault lies in the giving or the receiving or both, fixing the feedback process is vital because there is almost no other way to change behavior.

Managers have a responsibility to give clear, insightful, and useful feedback, if only because it makes good business sense. Employees will eagerly continue behaviors they are acknowledged for. Only when they learn what they need to do differently can they change ineffective behaviors. But while many employees dislike receiving feedback, fearing it will be negative; many managers also dislike giving it. They may want to avoid angry confrontations, retaliation, or decreased motivation, so they withhold constructive criticism. The result: nothing changes and ultimately productivity suffers.

Most employees don't head into work thinking, "How can I screw things up today?" They want to do a good job and are *dependent* on feedback to succeed. Feedback offered in conjunction with training, support, coaching and development encourages people to learn and grow. While no one likes to hear that his performance isn't up to standards, isn't it better to learn what is not effective and have an opportunity to change than to end up derailed within an organization and not know why?

There are ways to both give and receive feedback that can lead to improved individual performance as well as overall operational performance. It is important to recognize the power of good feedback, the pitfalls of ineffective feedback and the actions you can take both as provider and receiver that will make the feedback process feel less like a trip to the dentist and more like a great exercise class where you feel stretched to your capacity, but not injured.

Ineffective Feedback Takes a Toll

Good feedback motivates people to change. Bad feedback, including comments that are demeaning, vague, or emotionally charged, can leave a person feeling battered. The employee may realize that his performance isn't measuring up, and that feels bad enough, but without concrete examples of what he is doing wrong and what he should be doing instead, the employee feels helpless to improve. And from there it's a short step to low morale and another short step to reduced productivity.

When I was a training manager for a computer company I was asked to give a presentation on quality to our managers from Japan when they came to tour our manufacturing sites. I memorized their eight Japanese names in order to greet them in a personal way. As I introduced them to my boss pronouncing each of their names perfectly, the time came to say his name and I completely blanked. I had used up my brainpower remembering their names. After the presentation, my boss called me to his office. I was feeling proud for having learned our visitors' names and giving a good presentation, so when my boss scolded, "How could you forget my name?," I was completely taken aback. I apologized immediately, but he went on and on for twenty minutes about how embarrassed he felt, how I hadn't shown him the proper respect and how small he felt. By the time he finished, *I* felt like the injured party. Needless to say, he never mentioned anything I had done right that day.

Another boss asked me to write a request for proposal (RFP) for vendor training. When I completed the RFP, his feedback was, "No, that's not what I'm looking for." My request for clarification only netted a terse, "I'll know it when I see it." Imagine my frustration knowing something needed to change but being unsure what that was. Without useful feedback, I was flying blind, changing things for change sake. If only I had a clue — or been able to read his mind — I could have created a better RFP. Even after countless attempts, he never did see that magic RFP he was looking for.

Concrete examples of effective behaviors are always preferable, but managers should be careful not to compare one employee's performance to another's. "Why don't you write like Joan does?" one manager asked me during a feedback session. "She is so fast and clear." The manager might as well have asked me why I couldn't shoot free throws like Michael Jordan. I knew I would never be as good a Joan as Joan was, and I resented the comparison. Later I found out she used a similar approach when giving feedback to Joan, saying, "Why can't you use humor like Sandy does in her presentations?" Not surprisingly, Joan and I worked far less collaboratively than had we not been pitted against each other.

Digging for Feedback Gold

Admittedly, feedback can be hard to hear, especially when it's carelessly or even cruelly delivered. But if you can get past the negative tone, a valuable nugget of information can sometimes be discovered.

I once worked with a computer company to implement total quality in its fiber optics division. After a successful kick-off, the leadership team set their quality goals, six key performance measures, and metrics. When I met with them a month later to assess progress, they admitted that they had fallen behind but assured me they were still committed. The following month I returned to discover that still no progress had been made. I was disappointed but surmised I hadn't adequately communicated the importance of the goals. After invoking the name of the CEO and his public commitment to excellence, I told them, "I expect to see significant progress next month. Quality is critical to the success of the company. We all need to do our part." The managers looked back at me sheepishly and nodded their assent. When the General Manager asked me to stop by his office on my way out, I was expecting him to apologize for his team.

The GM closed the door as I entered his office and sat down. Without so much as one pleasantry, he roared, "Who do you think you are, you little corporate puke, to lecture us about quality? We live and die each day based on the quality of our products and just because we don't use your 'performance measures' doesn't mean we don't care about quality."

I felt my face turn bright red; my voice choked in my throat. I mumbled an apology and slunk out of his office before he could see me cry. I did cry when I told my team what had happened. They consoled me, telling me the GM was wrong and he had a reputation for being gruff. But when I heard beyond the tone of his voice to what he was saying, I knew he was right. And, as painful as the feedback was to receive, it has made all the difference in my success as a coach and consultant. It taught me never to think my goals and processes are more important than the client's, to *ask* before jumping to conclusions, and to work collaboratively with clients and not assume that I know better. Recognizing that people and organizations are often doing the best they can given their unique circumstances helped me understand that I can't impose my time frame. The most powerful realization was that if I define my success by someone else changing, I'm putting undue pressure on both of us.

Yes, the GM's feedback was useful. But not everyone can hear beyond an angry delivery to appreciate the content, so I don't recommend his approach. The gift of his feedback was that he opened a new possibility to me and exposed a blind spot, and without that knowledge my effectiveness was limited. However, battering me with the message just as easily could have caused me to discount it.

At another point in my career, I made an even bigger mistake and received feedback about it from the Chief Operating Officer. Working with a professor from a well-known business school to help our organization find different solutions to internal problems, I had shared some sensitive information. After the professor met with the COO, I was summoned. The COO started by thanking me for my hard work on the initiative. He said, "I know from our work together you are passionate about wanting us to be successful, so

I understand that in your conversations with the professor, you wanted him to have enough information to help the organization. But, I want to caution you about what you share with outsiders. We have been burned before. The last time we were too forthcoming about our problems, we ended up the subject of a book." Immediately, I realized what I had done wrong and apologized. The COO said, "Point made. I have every confidence in you and your team." I left his office wiser and committed to work even harder. If he asked me to walk over hot coals, I would have done so.

I learned immensely from the feedback provided by both the GM and the COO. But my trust and dedication to the COO deepened because of the care he took in giving me feedback. I asked for feedback from him many more times and learned tremendously from his wisdom. And while I might occasionally put on my Teflon suit and ask the GM for feedback, the less I had to work with him again, the better.

The power of feedback means some managers can find themselves teetering between crushing someone's spirit and heightening their motivation. Because feedback is key to improving performance and because its effectiveness hinges on the way it is delivered, it is vital that people on both the giving and the receiving end take steps to reduce the pain and increase the gain during every feedback session.

When You're on the Giving End of Feedback – 10 tips for success

Giving effective feedback is both an art and a skill. We can't always predict how someone will receive our feedback, but there are ways to help ensure your message will be heard and acted upon accordingly. While the process is somewhat straightforward, the time you take to adjust to each person's situation pays off when her performance improves. Here are some tips for giving powerful, yet supportive and caring, feedback.

1. ### Make sure the employee completes a self-assessment.
   Having people assess their own performance has several benefits. First, people tend to be more critical of themselves than their managers, so they may acknowledge deficiencies that managers might be reluctant to point out. By allowing the employee to list specific development areas, the manager may be able to minimize the discomfort of pointing out deficiencies and focus on ways the employee can improve in that area. Second, when people become self-aware, they gain competence in emotional intelligence. And, research on EI shows that two-thirds of the behaviors that differentiate *great* performance from merely good are in the areas of emotional intelligence.

2. ### Provide context for the feedback discussion.
   Clarifying overall performance before providing feedback helps to put the employee at ease. When she is told that she is doing well and the manager is giving her tips for getting better, the feedback is more eagerly received. Without an overall assessment of performance, an employee may feel the feedback is a message to shape up or be fired. Feeling the stress of losing her job, her performance may decline. An employee was reprimanded for typos in her document. Without understanding her overall performance she didn't know if this was a minor problem to pay attention to or a critical issue that was putting her job at risk.

3. **Articulate the employee's strengths and look for ways to leverage them.**

   All too often, people tend to gloss over positive feedback and jump to the developmental areas, perhaps out of some misguided sense of modesty. When this happens, I ask them to slow down, marinate in the praise, and consider how to leverage it. I find that when people maximize their competencies, they are far more effective than if they only work on improving development areas. This is not to say that people should ignore deficits. On the contrary, it is important to recognize areas that stand in the way of successful performance.

   Tom was a feedback seeking machine, but he only listened for what he could improve, for example, time management. As a result, he spent longer hours in the office trying to respond to every email and made fewer sales calls, not recognizing that his gift at selling was a key factor in his division's success. By asking him to shift his focus to his strength at selling, he increased corporate earnings by 8% and had a significant impact on the company. Improving at time management might make Tom's life easier, but wouldn't affect the bottom line. Tom, like many people, took his strengths for granted, assuming if he could do it, so could everyone else.

   Being a team player is usually considered a great strength, but one Executive Vice President I worked with was struggling to meet his own goals while helping his peers. He was admired for willingness to step in and support the other members of the leadership team, but it came at great personal expense, as he was often the first to arrive at work in the morning and the last to go home at night. To prevent burnout, he had to learn to say no. "You have put in long hours on their last three big initiatives," I reminded him. "Do you think they realize the cost to you for helping them? And, won't they want to help you in return?" I encouraged him to leverage his strong personal connection with his peers, enlisting their support in helping him maintain his focus on the key things he was committed to and asking them to accept his declines.

4. **Be sure that feedback supports the employee's goals.**

   Before I can give relevant feedback, I need to know the other person's vision or goal. Feedback I solicited on one of my clients indicated he was too narrowly focused and needed to learn other functional areas to be more effective in the organization. But his goal was to become an expert in one area of tax. Telling him to broaden his skills would not have helped him get where *he* wanted to go. Instead, we worked on clarifying his career goals with his management and ensuring they supported his plan to deepen his functional expertise.

   Another client's 360-degree feedback indicated some people thought he was not assertive enough in executive meetings. Apparently this comment came from his peers who tended to compete with one another and were often aggressive in defending their viewpoints. But my client's

goal was to be chosen to lead the acquisition team when his organization acquired a smaller company. He felt being collaborative would increase his colleagues' trust and ultimately gain their support for him to lead the acquisition. Being too aggressive could damage the relationships he had built.

To provide effective feedback, it's important to align yourself with the individual's deeper purpose and not impose your own goals or those other people think the individual should be pursuing. I learned that lesson the hard way in my total quality facilitation role.

5. Look for the one change that if made will impact other areas.

I pay attention to a lot of different pieces of data before deciding what to share with the employee. Suppose I have noticed that Linda's presentations seem stilted and that she goes on too long about some points. She doesn't seem to connect with the audience or engage them in dialogue. If I give her too much feedback, it may seem overwhelming. Instead, I look for one change that if implemented, can impact all the areas. I tell Linda to make eye contact with her audience and notice their reactions to what she says. If she does this, she will see in their body language when she is in danger of losing her audience by talking too long. Increased eye contact will also allow her to engage them more and realize she is among friends, which should also help her feel more relaxed.

Another executive's 360-degree feedback indicated he lacked respect for others' time, often showing up late to meetings and missing project deadlines. Because he was reluctant to disappoint anyone, he would allow people to come to his office and chat with him as long as they wanted. By helping him find polite ways to end conversations and say no to extra projects, he had no trouble showing up on time and hitting deadlines.

6. Focus on what to *do*, rather than what *not* to do.

Developmental feedback is generally accepted more easily if it is presented in a positive way. Instead of saying, "Don't interrupt others in meetings," I might suggest, "Wait three seconds after the speaker stops talking before you speak." It is easier to *do* something than to *stop* doing something. Another client has a tendency to complain about his management. I asked him to identify what the managers are doing well. This shift in perspective can bring about a shift in behavior, outlook, mood — even morale.

7. Give timely examples of specific behavior.

Providing examples helps people understand and accept the feedback. That's why it is important to provide feedback as close to the incident as possible so the employee will recall the situation clearly. A colleague frequently interrupted us when we were presenting our ideas. After giving him the feedback, his behavior didn't change. When I asked him about it, he said he thought I was exaggerating. So, in our next team meeting, I asked him if he'd like a gentle indication when he cut us off. "Sure," he laughed, "catch me if you can." We each had cush balls and when he interrupted we threw them at him. After five hits, he called a truce. Awareness is the first step in helping

people change their behavior. Had my boss been able to provide some examples of what I could do differently on the RFP, my ability to learn and grow would have increased.

8. **Highlight the impact that the employee's behavior has on others.**

When a person understands the impact that a behavior has on other people, the importance of addressing that behavior hits home. After all, if there is no negative impact to a behavior, why bother going through the difficulty of changing it? I pointed out to my client that starting his sentences with "*but*" led others to think he was disagreeing with them or worse, dismissing their comments. But he couldn't believe one word could have such a profound impact on people. So, for the next half-hour, every time he made a statement I began my response with "but." Finally it dawned on him how dismissive that little "but" sounded and he began to understand why people criticized him for being resistant.

9. **Gauge how hard hitting to be when giving feedback.**

Some people are sensitive and get their feelings hurt easily. Others are so impervious to feedback that you feel like you need a sledgehammer to get through to them. Therefore it's important to temper your feedback to match the personality of the person you are dealing with. When people seem feedback resistant, often the best way to get their attention is to have them collect their own data. I sometimes ask clients to audiotape or videotape their meetings or presentations and review them afterwards. When they see and hear the behavior they have been criticized for, they finally accept it.

One of my clients had a hard time accepting that her brilliance wasn't the only criteria for getting her promoted and that her lack of teamwork could keep her from moving up. No matter how I gave her the feedback, she just didn't hear me. She was praised in her 360-degree review for her brilliance, competence, commitment to quality and customer relations. But her peers said she was nasty, sarcastic, demeaning and critical. She dismissed their negative comments by saying, "Well if they were top performers, I wouldn't have to criticize them." I asked if she really thought they deserved her contempt. She said no, but added she resents people who she perceives don't work as hard as she does. When I asked her what she thought was the impact of her poor treatment of peers, she downplayed it. To get her to see things from her peers' point of view, I asked her to imagine she had been awarded the Nobel Prize and would be presented with it at a dinner. She bought an expensive designer suit, Ferragamo shoes, had her hair and make-up done professionally and wore dazzling jewelry to receive her award. As she walked on stage, people started gagging and covering their noses because she had dog poop on the bottom of her shoes. "That," I said, "is how your criticism of peers is received." Despite her many accomplishments, she ended up smelling bad because of her behavior to others. She never forgot this story and recalled it when she went to meetings with peers. Sometimes, a dramatic illustration or metaphor has more impact than dozens of real-world examples.

10. **Give feedback when you can be calm, professional and caring.**

Creating a positive atmosphere is key to delivering effective feedback, and the

way you conduct yourself plays a big part in conveying the right tone. I always make sure I'm centered, relaxed, and intentional about how and why I'm giving the feedback. I begin with a self-examination of my own motivations. If I am irritated at the person, I ask myself if the feedback is intended to help her improve or to make me feel better. When it is the latter, I stay quiet. If I am angry or upset, my emotions will undoubtedly be revealed in my voice and body language, which may cause the person to become defensive and refuse to accept my feedback. When preparing for a feedback session, recognize that people are not trying to mess up — we all make mistakes — and that feedback that is considerate of the person's ego and desire to do better is more likely to be accepted. Feedback that leaves people feeling battered or shamed robs them of their self-esteem and deprives them of the resources they need to tackle a task they failed at before.

When You Are on the Receiving End

How you receive feedback will either encourage people to give it to you or cause them to shy away. The key is how you listen. If your demeanor shows openness and receptivity, it encourages the speaker to go on. But if your body language and voice tone indicate resistance, the speaker will likely stop or curtail their comments. To prepare for a feedback session, take a few deep breaths and remember to stay centered. Assume the person giving the feedback has only good intentions. Remember that the feedback says something about the person giving it and his perspective.

- **Ensure understanding of the feedback.**
  After hearing the feedback, repeat it back ("So what you're saying is . . . ") to verify that you understand it. If examples weren't given or you can't recall doing the behavior, ask for specifics.

- **Thank the feedback giver.**
  Since feedback is a gift intended to help you improve, you should always thank the person who gave you feedback — after all, it may have required a considerable effort for the person to explain the feedback and it may not have been easy to deliver it. If it strikes a chord, tell the person how you intend to change your behavior. You could even ask the reviewer to notice and give you feedback when you show improvement.

- **Engage others in helping you change.**
  Engage the person in supporting your behavior change. A client of mine spoke to all the people who had given him feedback during his 360 review. He told them what he had taken from their feedback, and what he intended to do, and he asked them to help him by pointing out changes in his behavior when they saw them. He committed to being open to other points of view and at the end of each meeting he explicitly asked, "Do you feel like I heard and took in your suggestions?" Behavior change tends to happen well before others recognize it, and our tendency is to notice actions that reinforce the old behavior, not the new one. By asking this question, my client received immediate feedback on his progress and he also increased awareness among others of his change.

- **Empathize with the other person.**
  It takes courage to voice a concern, especially when you feel like the injured party. Put yourself in the person's position and imagine how you would feel if this had happened to you.

- **Be open and curious.**
  Avoid being defensive. It shuts down the feedback giver and causes you to come across as resistant. The result is a double-whammy: not only do you have a behavior that is getting in your way, you aren't open to acknowledging or changing it. Don't attack the person giving you feedback by pointing out his deficits. If you share your perspective at the time you are given feedback, some people feel like the feedback wasn't heard. It is better to accept it initially, and later go back to discuss your point of view.

- **Assess the validity of the feedback.**
  What if the feedback is completely off base? Perhaps the description of the behavior was correct but the motivation behind it was not. One manager accused me of being arrogant because she asked how we should design a program and I immediately offered an idea. "You always think you know the answer to everything," she snapped. I was taken aback because I thought we were brainstorming and I had *an* answer, certainly not *the* answer. I verified that I heard her concern and committed to asking for clarification before jumping in with an answer. She seemed mollified. Later that day, I asked her if we could review the situation again and explained my perspective. She was open to hearing it and could see my viewpoint, perhaps in part because I had accepted her earlier feedback.

  Remember that people giving feedback are human too and make mistakes. Don't feel that you have to accept observations and assessments that don't ring true. If you aren't aware of the behavior, consider how you can collect your own data to validate what others are seeing. First, check out the feedback with others. Be open. Find ways to increase your sensitivity.

  A colleague of one of my clients accused her of taking credit for others' work. My client asked for an example and was told that she presented the work of a subcommittee without giving them credit. She couldn't remember doing so. She thanked the person for bringing it to her attention and apologized for the oversight. After asking several other people who were at the meeting, they told her she had in fact named and thanked the team, even including their names on the second page of the presentation. She went back to the colleague, showed her the presentation, and recounted what her team members had told her. The colleague apologized and agreed to check her facts before voicing her concerns.

It Starts at the Top

Feedback triggers vulnerabilities and requires internal fortitude to deliver and to accept. When senior managers wholeheartedly participate in the process by having their own ways of working examined, amazing things begin to happen organizationally. Consider the situation at Dell Computer when CEO Michael Dell and president Kevin Rollins wanted to change the culture from being only focused on getting results to having improved collaboration on the leadership team and a more mature and welcoming corporate culture. They realized their own roles in the company's competitive culture and began the change by hiring a coach to conduct 360-degree interviews of the executive team,

themselves included. Michael's tendency to be overly analytical and transactional made others feel bulldozed, while Kevin's image as critical and opinionated caused direct reports to feel dismissed. The tension between the two of them spiraled through the organization and set a combative tone. They were willing to not only look at uncomfortable data about themselves, but also to make visible commitments to change, such as having adjoining offices with open doors and displaying toys on their desks to remind themselves of their intentions – a bulldozer for Michael and a curious George monkey for Kevin.

Remember the amazing transformation of Jack Welch? In his early days at GE, he was called "neutron Jack" because of his tendency to destroy anyone who got in his way. But the behavior that got him to the top wouldn't keep him there. As CEO, his openness to coaching and change earned him the nickname "boundaryless Jack" for eliminating walls between departments and getting rid of planning for the sake of greater execution. And, toward the end of his career he was seen as "values-based Jack" for his ability to energize others, take risks, and execute.

Compare Jack with Chainsaw-Al Dunlap who anointed himself as America's best CEO in 1998. He was totally unwilling to accept feedback from any of his executives. His tac-

tics of firing people to make profits earned Sunbeam good earnings in the short run, but nearly ran the company into the ground. While his style was good for cutting and slashing, he wasn't able to win the hearts and minds of the workforce to re-build after the devastation.

As reported by executive coach Marshall Goldsmith, "Today, many of the world's most respected chief executives are setting a positive example by opening up, striving continually to develop themselves as leaders." General Electric and Dell are on the list of top-20 companies for leaders according to Hewitt Associates, a top human resource consulting firm. If senior management asks for feedback and acts on it, they can have a significant impact on the success of the organization. Who has more influence than the leadership on a company's success? The case for feedback is compelling.

Set Yourself Up for Success

Sports teams review their plays in great detail, not to ridicule poor performance but to learn from both the good and the bad. A coach who is afraid to point out problems won't have a winning team. But when the goals are clear, feedback becomes easier to give and to take. No linebacker would deny his role in a botched play when he sees it on a videotape, nor would he feel that the coach's feedback is unwarranted, because he wants to achieve the goal of winning just as much as his coach.

In coaching hundreds of executives, I have yet to come across a client who did not want to hear how others perceive him or her. In fact, they all hunger for feedback, knowing it will help them determine what changes in their behavior will make them more effective. Without the insight that feedback provides, they might as well be warming the bench.

The most effective teams challenge each other to grow and improve. They know that withholding feedback hurts the individual and the team. Building evaluation and feedback into their team process sets an expectation that reviewing performance is as necessary as defining goals. They celebrate accomplishments that come from challenging themselves and each other. And, they all want the feedback to be caring and constructive.

If you aren't getting feedback, ask for it. Interview customers, bosses, direct reports, even your spouse and children. With knowledge and intention, we can get better. Be judicious in whom you ask for feedback. Choose astute mentors who are where you want to be or who have a broader perspective. Ask valued peers and create a climate of sharing feedback for the sake of mutual growth. Learn to give and ask for meaningful and caring feedback. Remember the person in your life who saw gifts in you before you did and encouraged you to step up to greatness. Bring that quality into your feedback sessions and watch performance soar.

About the Author…

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With an MBA from Harvard and masters degree in mathematics and computer science, she understands the unique challenges leaders face in the business world, and knows the value they can bring to an organization when they have impact. Sandy has been working with leaders in Fortune 50 organizations, major associations, and government for over twenty years. Her expertise is in individual and team coaching, organization development and training, especially in the areas of leadership and change.

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