Would you like some feedback?

A friend told me the other day about an interesting experience he's had upon moving into a new role.

He's committed to ongoing learning and development - for himself and those in his team. As part of that he actively seeks feedback and he's learned to make a habit of giving feedback as well.

But his new environment has reminded him that feedback is very much part of the culture that we create.

He'll say to someone, "Can I give you some feedback?".

What do you think the response is? What's your response on reading this - or reading the title of this article? What was your response last time someone put that question to you? Or the last time you put the question to someone else?

The reaction he typically gets in this new environment is:
A concerned look ... A hesitant "okay" ... Folded arms, tightened facial muscles, a furrowed brow. Wariness.

He can't know what's happening inside the person's brain, but all the externals suggest that their reaction to an invitation to get some feedback is not good.

Which bothers him for three reasons:

The first is that it suggests that "feedback" is pretty widely interpreted as "bad news", "correction", "failure" or "problem".

The second is that this team has no other competing interpretation for the word "feedback", whereas his previous team understood it in much broader and more positive terms.

The third is that it makes his task of passing on constructive feedback more of a drama than it should be. Because typically what my friend is setting up when he asks "Can I give you some feedback?" is an exchange in which he wants to pass on some supportive acknowledgement or appreciation for what the person or group has done.

He knows that over time the culture will "take" - that "feedback" will begin to be heard as "good" rather than "bad" and that the response will shift from "if you really think you have to" to "please!".

The good news is that despite the early wariness about feedback, his intentional efforts are being noticed. And appreciated. For example, an emailed feedback message he sent to one staff member had been proudly posted in their workstation (sadly, along with the comment to colleagues that it was the first time in their career they'd received any feedback from his level of management).
"Feedback" shouldn't be a word solely associated with "bad news", "wrong" or "performance problem". Consider four types of feedback that can be part of healthy and positive everyday workplace life:

* **Instructive** - there are few more frustrating things than being given something to do without proper instruction (and often without clear performance expectations). Instructive feedback enables us to improve, develop and refine. Giving instructive feedback shows respect for the task and the person performing it.

* **Corrective** - yes, there are times when, despite instructions, we fail to follow procedures or meet standards. There's no sense letting mistakes, faults, failures, or poor performance go on unchecked. No one wins from ignorance. And there's no respect for either the task or the individuals involved if we don't correct problems. (And few things erode our authority more quickly than failing to address problems in a timely and professional manner.) Corrective feedback should be matter-of-fact, directive, clear and specific. It doesn't need to come with an apology. It loses impact if it comes with personal judgement. And of course it will rightly ignored and resisted if it's delivered with abuse or aggression.

* **Supportive** - perhaps the least acknowledged but potentially most powerful form of feedback. It's said that we tend to take strengths (our own and others') for granted and damage control weaknesses. And that's often how feedback works. We remain silently grateful for the good things people do and summon up courage to tackle the faults in emergencies. No fun for anyone. Supportive feedback takes a number of forms including empathising when things are tough, encouraging in the face of challenges, acknowledging and participating. It's perhaps the easiest and most "everyday" form of feedback we can engage in. Supportive feedback isn't silly, gratuitous or patronising, it's simply a sincere and practical way of letting people know that they and what they're doing matter to you and that you are willing to go to bat or provide assistance if they need it.

* **Appreciative** - similar to being supportive, appreciative feedback actively says "thank you". It looks for opportunities to celebrate and highlight achievement, persistence, ingenuity, creativity, character, service, high standards, and positive example. It respects unique contributions and outstanding endeavours and sometimes (though not always by any means) comes with a tangible expression of gratitude in the form of a reward or gift. It's about "catching people doing something right". It's amazing how motivating a simple expression of appreciation can be.

When we consider these four types of feedback, most of us would probably say "yes, please" if we were asked "would you like some feedback?".

In *Sharpening the Focus: Managing performance in the APS* (2006), the Corporate Leadership Council noted that some of the key factors shown to drive employee performance are: "the fairness and accuracy of informal feedback the employee receives, and their manager's emphasis on the employee's performance strengths" (p16).

Note the word "informal". Feedback is too often seen as some formal - even artificial - form of communication. In fact, the more we normalise it the richer and more useful it becomes. In healthy relationships feedback is frequent, informal and, of course, honest.
and constructive. Because the goal of feedback is to build up, not tear down.

The aim of effective Situational Leadership® is to create the conditions for others' success. Creating a culture of healthy feedback is one way to create those conditions.

And one of the most powerful ways to create that culture is to help people become confident enough to actually invite feedback.

"It is amazing to see how the fear of feedback subsides and the truth emerges as people get more skilled and comfortable in inviting feedback ...," says Graham Winter, in The Man Who Cured the Performance Review (2009, Jossey Bass).

So, what will be the response when you next ask, "would you like some feedback?". Whatever the initial response, you can take a step towards better conditions for success if your feedback becomes known for being appropriately (situationally!) instructive, corrective, supportive and appreciative.

Aubrey Warren
Executive Coach, Facilitator and Trainer

growth coaching international

Queensland

Situational Leadership® Australia