Giving Feedback Is Easy, Much Harder to Accept, Learn From, and Apply It

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Business meeting in a modern office | Credit: Hinterhaus Productions

About 15 years ago, I was enrolled in a counseling psychology Master's program. It was quite good and I learned a lot back then and continue to use many of the counseling/coaching skills today in the corporate world.

As part of the program, we were required to conduct counseling sessions with real clients and film these sessions (after securing the client's permission) so that our classmates and professors could review these sessions and offer their feedback.

One day, during a feedback session about my counseling skills (again, where my peers and professor watched a video of my counseling session with a client and provided their feedback), I listened to them go on and on about what I was not doing right, what I had missed, or that my timing to talk was off, etc.

It is always hard to hear others criticize your work/performance but, by this time in the program, we had done this many times already so I was fine with receiving feedback, even tough feedback.

This went on for some time (at least it felt that way) and I tried to be patient, thinking and hoping that my professor would cut them off because, after a while, it started to sound the same (that is, they started repeating what someone else had shared). Unfortunately, my professor did not jump in and the "feedback" turned personal and became attacks on my character. It was very surreal because I could not believe that this was actually happening to me (a counselor-in-training) and the sources of the attacks were my peers

(other counselors-in-training) and then having a professor (who was also a practicing psychologist) just sit there and do nothing made the entire experience feel like a bad dream.

I finally stopped them and told everyone that while I love and appreciate their feedback, because that's how I learn, and although I try to always be open to feedback about my performance, when it turns into personal jabs, then that crosses the line and that's where I have a problem. I told the professor that I was disappointed that she just sat there and did nothing while my classmates were attacking me (as a person) and not redirect them to focus on my actions (as a counselor).

Next, I offered my own feedback to my peers and professor about how they completely missed the cultural perspective in evaluating my performance and that their perspectives and opinions about when to interrupt a client while the client was talking (in order to offer the suggested counseling response) and how to come across as "professional" *failed* to account for a cultural dimension (both the client's and the counselor's), one in which age and experience (or lack of one) both play an important role in how and how often one offers feedback.

You would have thought that that might have been the end of it, but the attacks began again, with the professor sitting idly by not knowing what to do or not wanting to intervene. Again, I told the group that it felt like this was a character attack because they were criticizing my personality/character (or what they believed they "knew" about me) and not my actions in providing the talk therapy.

My counseling classmates and professor were very fast to give out all sorts of feedback (ideas, tips, suggestions), but when it was given back to them, they weren't just slow to accept it, they *dismissed* it entirely.

In his book, "The Complete New Manager," John Zenger shared that inside our minds is a picture of how we view ourselves. This mental self-portrait consists of our behaviors, values, and self-image.

> "In most cases, leaders with a fatal flaw are totally unaware of that flaw. For example, people who immediately reject others' ideas would probably describe themselves as having such extensive experience that they know what ideas will succeed and fail. These individuals don't know they are perceived as rejecting everyone else's ideas" (Zenger, 2010, p. 167).

Zenger explained that feedback that these leaders receive (from team discussions, 360-degree appraisals, or coaching sessions) convey messages which are contrary to how they view themselves.

When faced with this situation, these leaders have three choices:

(1) Deny the information – It's very easy to dismiss feedback from one or two sources, but when you receive feedback from multiple, reliable sources then it can be much harder to ignore.

(2) Change their self-concept – Leaders admit to themselves that they do not know everything and that their own ideas are not the only good ones.

(3) Change their behavior – Feedback is most powerful when it is actually applied to altering behavior.

According to Eichinger, Lombardo, and Ulrich (2004) the single best predictor of who will advance up the corporate ladder and do well once there is — learning agility. Eichinger et al. said we demonstrate learning agility when we're able to reflect on our experiences and be disciplined enough to change our behaviors.

Ideally, the best way to predict leadership is to use a combination of cognitive ability (i.e., IQ), personality, simulation, role play, learning agility, and multi-rater assessment (i.e., 360-degree assessment). But if you only had one choice, use learning agility (Eichinger, Lombardo, & Ulrich, 2004).

> "Learning agility is the ability to reflect on experience and then engage in new behaviors based on those reflections. Learning agility requires self-confidence to honestly examine oneself, self-awareness to seek feedback and suggestions, and self-discipline to engage in new behaviors" (Eichinger, Lombardo, & Ulrich, 2004, p. 495).

Takeaways: (1) It is essential that you take an honest **look inside** yourself. Be self-aware and brave enough to **ask for feedback**. And most of all, **learn from and apply the feedback** to improving yourself and your behaviors. (2) **It can be very easy, especially for extroverts and people who love to talk, to give feedback to others, but those who tend to be** *quick to give* **feedback are sometimes** *slow to accept and apply* **feedback themselves.**

> **"Not to know is bad; not to wish to know is worse." —African proverb**

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References

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