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Five Tips for Giving Fearless Feedback

It can be just as daunting giving as getting feedback, but leaders can't back away from the challenge.

By Libby Gill

Are you still using the old "praise sandwich" model of giving feedback? That is, sandwiching your criticism between two slices of praise. If so, it's time to ditch the sandwich in favor of Fearless Feedback.

You may think you're taking some of the sting out of your complaint by adding some encouraging commentary. But it's more likely that you're actually watering down your criticism to the point that the recipient can hardly recognize it for what it is: an opportunity to improve.

Resist the urge to sugarcoat. Your job is not to make people feel better (though you'll have other opportunities for that), your job is make them do better. Here are five ways you can start giving Fearless Feedback today.

Be crystal clear. Your team probably has no idea that giving feedback can be every bit as daunting as receiving it. But don't succumb to feeling like you're the big, bad boss for telling it like it is. State your criticism clearly, give a specific example, and explain how you'd like it rectified or dealt with in the future. For example, "That wasn't the best way to handle the customer complaint. You kept them waiting for an answer for two days, and when you responded, your tone was far too brusque. In future, we respond to complaints within 24 hours and when we're wrong, as we were in this case, we always give a sincere apology."

Be candid, but kind. It's okay to be tough on the sub-par performance, but it's important to be kind to the person. Your goal is not to humiliate your supervisee, but to change the unwanted behavior. A recent study in *The Journal of Consumer Research* showed that the more expert the recipient, the more direct you can be in your feedback. Not that you need

to use kid gloves with your more junior players, just be aware that they're still learning and customize your feedback with that in mind.

Make it timely. Your feedback should be immediate, either as soon as the infraction occurs or as soon as you learn of it. By hesitating, you send a message that it's not that big a deal or that you're too much of a wimp to criticize. Or both.

Give positive feedback, too. Instead of the praise model where you lump the good and bad together, diluting both in the process, use the same formula as in Point #1 above. When an employee does something great, let them know, specifically and immediately. Share the win with others. For example, "Terrific email this morning, I loved how you summed up the meeting for everyone. I'm going to let the Big Boss know how helpful it was."

Feed a feedback culture. Make it clear that it's always okay for your team members to ask for feedback. Model the appropriate way to ask without seeming like an approval-seeking suck-up. That is, "Hey, let me know what you thought about how I conducted the off-site. I'd love any notes you have so I can improve the next one."

What are your favorite tips for giving Fearless Feedback? Please share - I'd love your feedback!

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