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by Jamie Higgins and Diana Smith

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The Four Myths of Feedback

by *Jamie Higgins and Diana Smith*



FEEDBACK IS like exercise: we know it's good for us, but we don't do it often enough to reap the benefits. Why? When you're on the receiving end of feedback, it can be hard to remain open and receptive. Giving feedback isn't any easier. You may worry about making the other person defensive; you may fear damaging an important relationship. When it comes to feedback, who knows whether it's better to give or to receive? Neither is a picnic.

As consultants, we have worked with scores of executives, and we have found that the biggest obstacles to constructive feedback are some myths about feedback itself. When executives abandon these misconceptions, they find that feedback is both a lot less frightening and a lot more fruitful.

Myth 1: My reality is the reality, and my job is to get you to see it.

If I'm giving you feedback, I sit you down and tell you as clearly as I can what you're doing wrong. I assume that my reality is *the* reality—and that I must somehow get you to see it, either by hammering home point after point or by softly repeating the same things over and over. But a funny thing happens along the way. You balk. You feel I've missed something. You believe you can't do what I suggest given what you're up against. I say one thing; you say another. I'm selling; you're not buying. In the end you may salute, but the problem is apt to recur.

Astute executives don't buy this myth. They realize that their view is always partial, and they're more interested in getting it right than in being right. So they make a point of inquiring into the other person's views.

Myth 2: Defensiveness is bad and should be avoided at all costs.

As soon as someone differs with your feedback or suggests you might be missing something, you probably think, "Oh, boy, here we go, he's getting defensive." Then you either back down and soften the blow, thus diluting the impact (and value) of the feedback, or you ramp up your efforts in hopes that your airtight logic will overcome any defenses.

What we have found, however, is that every action to avoid or overcome defenses triggers an equal and opposite reaction. The more you push, the more the feedback-receivers push back. And they'll continue to push until what they hear takes into account the reality they see. So again: instead of dis-

counting or trying to overcome their concerns, you might try asking more about the obstacles they face, and offer advice about how to tackle them.

Myth 3: This performance problem has nothing to do with me.

Most of us assume that the cause of whatever problems exist lies with the other person. But it isn't always the case—and executives who recognize that they might be implicated make a point of asking questions specifically about their role. We heard one executive unhappy with the timing of a project ask her subordinate, "To what extent have I made it difficult to get the project done on time?" and, "Is there anything I could be doing differently?" She then listened for what *she* had to learn.

Myth 4: Mistakes are crimes to be covered up, punished, or both.

At some level we all know this idea is wrongheaded. But if you look at how people in organizations actually behave, you'd think everyone had fallen for it. People fear that if their mistakes are uncovered they'll be tried, found guilty, and sentenced. All too often they are, in fact, punished for their mistakes, and in turn punish others.

The best companies, however, make the most of mistakes. We happened to be visiting one firm when a mistake costing several million dollars came to the attention of the CEO. "That's a significant mistake," he told the VP who had made it, "and we sure don't want it to happen again. I'd like you to identify the factors that led to the mistake and then design a system to prevent such errors in the future." Instead of covering up the error or punishing the VP for it, these executives put the mistake to work to improve the performance of the whole firm.

If you can get past these four myths, pretty soon you and the person you're giving feedback to will no longer be wrestling with each other. Instead, you'll be working side by side on a common problem. After all, the whole point of feedback is to continually improve performance. That's how you get to the Olympics. Now if we can only get to the gym.

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