

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

Giving Powerful Feedback ▶ 06/13/07

After a team of executives concluded an exercise at a recent offsite, I asked one of the participants if I could give him some feedback. He visibly flinched. "Sure," he squeaked unconvincingly. Then he swallowed so loudly we all laughed.

"My goodness, what are you expecting?" I asked.

"Well," he said bravely, "nothing good."

In fact, the feedback I had for him was nothing *but* good. During the exercise he'd displayed a powerful capacity to think at a high-level and summarize articulately. He'd added value every time he spoke. That was my feedback for him.

But his fear was an authentic demonstration of how most people experience feedback: negative and painful. Most leaders grew up on that sort of feedback. They survived it themselves so they pass it on. But feedback can be very different. Here are steps you can take to change how your people experience your feedback.

To begin, learn to tell people what you want them to continue doing.

It's hard to see what doesn't need fixing. It's a learned skill. And it's counter-intuitive. Clients repeatedly ask, "Why should I give 'em a pat on the back for doing their job? That's what they get paid for!"

A legitimate question. Two answers.

First, your people don't always know what they're doing well. They struggle to figure out what will please you. If you don't tell them what you want them to continue doing, they may stop doing it.

Second, if you really want people to change behaviors, they need to believe you have their best interest at heart. If you only give them feedback when something needs fixing, they're more likely to resist you.



One theory of management says that in order for your people to accept developmental feedback non-defensively, you have to deliver seven pieces of positive feedback for every one piece of corrective feedback. Seven to one! That's a lot. But it's a good ratio. I use it in my coaching all the time. It works.

Most leaders can't imagine what all that positive feedback would sound like. They fear they'll have to start saying things like, "Gee, I like the way you pulled into the parking lot this morning!" Or "Hey, nice cup that coffee's in!"

The easiest way to teach yourself to look for the positives is to think of an individual and ask yourself, "What do I want her to continue doing?"

When you begin to watch people through that filter, you can give little drops of feedback all day long. "That email to Josh had the perfect tone to it. Well done." Or, "I liked the way you answered Pat during the staff meeting. You really responded thoughtfully."

These statements are neither patronizing nor insignificant. Letting your people know what you like is a gift. In less than thirty seconds you can plant seeds that will bear rich fruit.

By this measure, you can also give developmental feedback in little drops all day long. An easy way to think of this is ask yourself what you want people to start doing that they currently aren't doing or to stop doing that they currently are.

These don't need to be big sit-down discussions. They sound like this: "Your email to Josh had two misspelled words in it. It's really important to me that you spell check everything that goes out of this office." Or, "The way you responded to Pat during the staff meeting is a good example of what you and I have been talking about regarding self-management. When you're feeling angry I really need you to take a time out and calm down before you speak."

What I'm detailing here is a powerful feedback model called "Start - Stop - Continue." Most people have no problem coming up with lots of behaviors they want people to start or stop. Most likely one behavior *you* may need to start is to observe what you want people to *continue* doing.

One caution. Don't use positive feedback to balance corrective feedback. Listen to this: "Your tone in that email was great but there were two misspelled words and I want everything spell checked before it goes out of this office." I call that a "kiss-slap." After the slap, people don't remember the kiss. Don't do it.



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If you're like most leaders, another behavior you may need to start is the delivery of short bursts of feedback, positive and corrective, regularly throughout your day. You don't need to deliver all three components (Start - Stop - Continue) at one time. Think of this as a continuous set of behaviors with no end. Do some of each all the time with the seven-to-one rule in mind. When people come to expect frequent little drops of feedback as part of their day-to-day interactions with you, you will have mastered one important part of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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