

Giving Your Boss Feedback

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I. INTRO: The Challenge of Putting Ideas Into Practice

The last few issues of Management Shorts have focused on feedback:

- * How to give it www.acorn-od.com/shorts/archive/shorts-17.html
- * How to invite it www.acorn-od.com/shorts/archive/shorts-19.html
- * How to build a culture where direct feedback is the norm
www.acorn-od.com/shorts/archive/shorts-20.html

Like many things in life, although the concepts behind feedback are relatively simple, putting them into practice sometimes seems impossible. This month we use a real life case study to look at the nitty-gritty of giving and receiving feedback in a difficult situation.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Case Study on Giving Feedback

The Difficult Boss

Molly is the 15-year old daughter of a dear friend of mine. The story of how she dealt with her tennis coach is not a tortured sports metaphor; rather it is an excellent illustration of how to successfully confront a boss who is making your life miserable.

Molly is a good enough tennis player to have made the varsity team her sophomore year, but as a middle of the pack player she doesn't have a

whole lot of leverage with the coach. In the work world, many of us are good, solid workers who know we provide value, but also know we can be replaced. That raises the risk factor on confronting the boss.

The Downward Spiral

Molly's coach is an old-school type who thinks the best way to motivate players is to pick on them and tear them down. This inspires some players to try harder to "show him", but it was completely demoralizing for Molly (and many others). Not only had a sport she loved become a chore, but her game was getting worse. In the workplace this kind of downward spiral is all too common – whether it is poor performance that sets off destructive manager behavior or poor manager behavior that causes a decline in performance, once the cycle is started, it can be very hard to stop.

Seeing Your Options

Before I continue Molly's story, let's stop and look at the options we all have in a situation like this:

- * **Do nothing.** This is the option most of us choose. It is too scary to speak up or we think we don't have the right – "it's just part of the job". We suck it up and live with the situation. (And maybe go home and kick the dog or yell at the kids. Silence does have a cost.)
- * **Try Harder.** We believe that if we just try harder at our jobs, the boss will notice and give us the praise we deserve.
- * **Make Nice.** A variation on Try Harder, we try to curry favor by pasting a smile on our face and saying nice things to the boss. If we can just be more "likeable" maybe he will lay off. This sometimes works, but risks making us look weak and doesn't really get at the problem.
- * **Push Back.** We tell the boss to "knock it off" or behave with equal belligerence – the "dose of his own medicine" approach. This is high risk, but with some people it actually gets their respect. Unfortunately, most of us do this in a burst of frustration rather than by choice. Risky either way.
- * **Go On the Attack.** This is similar to pushing back but more aggressive. We confront the boss with all of her failings as a manager and blame all our problems on her. Really risky.

- * **Give the Boss Feedback.** This is a direct approach of telling the boss how her behavior is making it difficult for us to produce the results she wants. Most of us avoid this option like the plague. It feels too much like the Going-On-The-Attack option. We don't know how to do it productively. We're afraid we'll lose our cool and make things worse. We're afraid we'll get feedback that is too painful to hear. It seems more risky than many of the other options.
- * **Quit.** A high school tennis player can quit without major life consequences, but for us working stiffs quitting is not really an option -- or only a last resort.

Molly considered all of these options and finally settled on a combination of the last two. She went to see the coach and said:

"I've decided to quit the team and go back to practicing with a local club. At the club I feel encouraged and supported as a player, and I grow as a player when I practice there. I don't have that experience here and have felt pretty demoralized."

Lets stop for a moment and analyze this simple statement.

Notice how often the word "I" shows up, and the complete absence of "you". Molly is sticking with her experience. There is no blame or accusation or statement about the coach's motives or intentions. If you read the July issue of Management Shorts on "Feedback Basics" you may recognize that Molly is using this model of feedback and "staying on her side of the net". [Yes, my sharp-eyed reader, this is a tortured sports metaphor since in real tennis the goal is to get the ball OVER the net – yet another reason to avoid sports metaphors. Nevertheless, the net metaphor provides a useful visual for thinking about feedback. You can download a PowerPoint on Feedback Basics at www.acorn-od.com/IntroToFeedback.pdf]

Staying On Your Side of the Net

Take a moment to think about a situation in which you were frustrated by someone who was in a position of power over you. When you tell the story is it all about what an awful person he or she was? Can you retell the story with a focus on how the situation impacted your feelings, motivation and performance?

The standard formula for feedback is to start with the behavior and then go to the impact, but it works just as well to use Molly's approach and start with the impact. If the coach cares even a little bit he will ask what he does to make her feel that way. He did ask and she gave him some specific behavioral examples such as how he relentlessly pointed out her mistakes and never commented on what she did well.

So far Molly has done a textbook perfect job of giving her coach feedback. Unfortunately, even when you do it perfectly, you still have challenges. When you give feedback you often get feedback flung back at you. And because most people don't have much experience with productive feedback, they often botch it up [a key reason most of us choose not to give feedback in the first place].

Bad Feedback

There is an unlimited number of ways people can botch up the feedback they give us. Some of the most common:

- * **Drive By.** Hit you in passing with no time to learn more or respond
- * **Humiliating.** Given in a public forum and leaves you embarrassed (or worse)
- * **Defensive.** Intent is to deflect the feedback that you have given them
- * **Blaming.** Another version of defensive. Your bad behavior is the cause of their behavior.
- * **Retaliatory.** Purpose is to hurt you or punish you, not to help you be more effective
- * **Vague.** Uses general terms like "team player" with no clues about the behavior
- * **Mixed Messages.** "You're not there quite yet, but keep up the good work."

The list goes on but I'm too depressed to continue.

Back to Molly's coach who managed to combine Blaming and Vague into a single response: "Well, my main problem with you is you're just not committed."

More Options

At the start of this article we looked at Molly's options for dealing with the overall situation. Now she has a new set of options:

- * **Scold him** for giving poor feedback or **lecture him** on the correct way to do it. [How often have you been tempted to tell a supervisor they were doing a lousy job with your performance review?]
- * **Blame him** by saying, "well, I'd be more committed if you weren't such a poor coach". [It is often tempting to tell a boss that our shortcomings are a result of their poor management.]
- * **Start a pissing match** by responding, "I am too committed!" [Ever been told you weren't a "team player"? My first response is usually "Am too!"]
- * **Nudge him back over to his side of the net** by getting him to talk about specific behavior.

As you might guess, Molly chose the last option. She said,

"What do I do that leads you to see me as not committed? I come to every practice and stay until the end, even when I am not feeling well. I stay focused and try my best whether it is a practice or a game. Those are the ways I try to show you my commitment. What does commitment mean to you?"

This kind of response works whenever the feedback is a vague label that could refer to a whole range of behaviors. It works whether you've been told you aren't a team player, aren't strategic enough, are too "political" or, my favorite, don't have "executive presence."

Focusing on Behavior

Whether the label is "true" or not isn't really the point. There is some behavior that is creating a negative impression and that is worth learning about (even if you then decide not to change the behavior).

Molly's coach was at first stumped by the behavior question, but finally came up with, "well, sometimes you show up on the day of a match and are not wearing your team T-shirt." Molly probed to ask if there were anything else, but he couldn't come up with anything. Now that the conversation was on specific behavior, Molly could explain that forgetting

her T-shirt was about being disorganized and groggy in the mornings, not about being committed to the team or to improving her game.

What could have been a very unpleasant confrontation with a person in a position of power, was now in the realm of rational discussion. Molly got her point across without blaming the coach or backing him into a corner. This last point is the most important. At the end of the conversation the coach told her he would think about what she had said and asked her to stay and play in the match that day and to consider coming to practice the rest of the week. **The whole point of a conversation like this is not to "win", but to create space for the other person to shift their behavior without losing face.**

Molly agreed and, much to her surprise, during the match the coach made several comments about what she was doing well! She went to practice the next day and this positive reinforcement continued. She and the coach mutually agreed that she would finish out the season with the team.

How Does This Apply to Me?

It may be easy to dismiss this story as not relevant to the work place. Playing on a high school tennis team is not the same as working 50 or 60 hours a week and worrying about your mortgage. Molly really wasn't risking much – no loss of income or career progress and no risk that she would have to continue to work with someone who was pissed at her. All true.

But how much of a risk is it to ask the boss to give you specific examples when your annual review feels unfair or too vague to act on? It may be a little riskier to initiate a conversation with someone who has power over you, but how does that compare to the risk of your own performance declining because of the situation?

Lets flip the situation around for a moment. Imagine one of your direct reports coming to you and saying,

"I'd like to be doing a better job than I am doing now. There are some things that you are doing that make it difficult for me to do my best. Could we talk about it?"

How would you respond?

III. FINAL THOUGHTS: Choices

Real conversations are often bumpy or messy. We're so aware of all the ways they can go wrong, that we often don't think about the many choices we have at each stage of the game. I hope this story of a teenage girl making proactive choices will give you the courage to speak up in your own challenging situation.

IV. UPDATE: News From Acorn Consulting

Management Shorts: The Book!

After several years of writing this newsletter I realized I now have most of the material for a book. Available in March, the working title is **Essential Strategies for Meeting the Everyday Challenges of Leadership**. I'm trying to come up with a snappier title and am offering 3 free copies to whomever comes up with the title I end up using. [This makes a perfect gift for your annoying boss or irritating co-worker!] Send your suggestions to me at ACorney@acorn-od.com

New Training Programs

The past 6 months I've been developing and delivering a number of exciting new training programs including:

- * Giving Supportive Feedback
- * Difficult Conversations
- * Emotional Intelligence and Professional Success
- * Self-Managed Teams
- * Meeting Facilitation
- * Organizational Consulting
- * Being An Effective Advisor
- * Coaching Skills for Managers

To learn more about these programs, or to discuss creating a custom workshop for your organization, contact me at ACorney@acorn-od.com

Until next month . . .

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

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