

Welcome to the October 2004 issue of Management Shorts
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I. INTRO: The Next Step in Feedback

Previous issues of Management Shorts have looked at how to **give effective feedback** www.acorn-od.com/shorts/archive/shorts-17.html, and simple things you can do as a manager to **increase the level of feedback you get** from peers and direct reports www.acorn-od.com/shorts/archive/shorts-19.html.

Benefits of High Quality Feedback

If you've been putting these tactics into practice you are probably starting to notice some of the following benefits:

- * **Improved performance** from your directs [in response to good feedback you've given them];
- * **Feeling more effective** in your job [because you are responding to feedback you've received]; and
- * **Resolution of problems that had seemed intractable** [because the exchange of high quality feedback uncovered things that were getting in the way].

Swimming Against the Tide

In spite of these benefits, you may also feel like you are swimming against the tide – it takes a lot of effort, it is awkward, people look at you funny, and you feel like giving up. Most work cultures don't support direct feedback [or direct communication of any kind]. Why is that?

The Vicious Cycle

There is a "vicious cycle" in most organizations of **low skills, poor outcomes, and little value placed on feedback:**

- * Other than the yearly review, there are few structures for feedback in most organizations;
- * The yearly review is often experienced as a salary negotiation exercise that provides little useful feedback and has minimal impact on actual performance;
- * Because feedback is seen as low value, there is little or no skill training, very little positive role modeling, and no rewards for improving skills;
- * Lack of skills or role models to imitate means that when people do try to give face-to-face feedback, it has little impact or even makes things worse;
- * This leads to a perception of feedback as something that is both high risk and low reward;
- * This perception means that when you do give or ask for feedback, everyone is tense and eager to get it over with;
- * This stance lowers the chances that anything productive will come out of the interaction; and
- * Poor outcomes reinforces the idea that feedback [or any direct communication] is a bad idea.

Given all of this, it's amazing that useful feedback happens at all.

Creating a Virtuous Cycle

Previous issues of **Management Shorts** have looked at what you can do as an individual. **This issue looks at structural approaches you can use in your team or organization to transform the "vicious cycle" into a "virtuous cycle" of productive feedback.**

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Real Life Examples

Simple structures and processes can have a big impact on an organization. The two organizations profiled below, took different approaches to getting people to talk to each other through structured feedback.

CROSS FUNCTIONAL FEEDBACK AT A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

My work with "EducationReform" started with a day of interactive training for all employees on basic feedback skills. A day of training is a great way to raise awareness and develop skills, but it isn't enough to change behavior in a sustainable way. A process or structure that **serves real business goals** is needed.

EducationReform is a national nonprofit with 50 employees in multiple locations. As with most geographically dispersed organizations, maintaining productive working relationships is always a challenge, and, in spite of those challenges, real work has to get done across the distance every day. **This need to be effective cross-functionally was our leverage for implementing a process for peer feedback.**

Gathering Data

Like many companies today, EducationReform starts its focal review process with the employee writing a self-review that identifies their strengths and development areas. We set up a process for them to do some "data collection" before writing their review.

Every employee was required to ask two or three co-workers for feedback. They had no obligation to put any of this feedback on their self-review or to tell their boss any of the feedback. Their only obligation to their boss was to have an initial conversation about whom they might approach for feedback. [The manager would suggest one or more of the following: Peers with whom the employee was highly interdependent; peers with whom they were having difficulties; or peers whose opinion they respected]. Each employee had the right to reject the boss's suggestions and make their own choices about whom to approach.

Format For Feedback

We provided an optional form for use in the feedback conversations. The left hand column was titled "How I See Myself" and had space for 3 or 4 strengths and 3 or 4 development areas. The right hand column was titled "How [Peer] Sees Me". The bottom of the page had a single question: "How could we improve our working relationship?" We suggested they sit down over coffee and use the forms to guide their conversation. They were free to ignore the form as long as they had a live conversation – no e-mail!

Feedback Frenzy

Yes, the idea made everyone anxious, but once they were immersed in it they found they didn't want to stop. In the month before focal reviews there was a frenzy of feedback. One manager with responsibilities that spanned all functions ended up having 12 feedback conversations! The HR manager told me that in the past, whenever she rolled out something new she had been inundated with complaints – but not this time. **The response to the new process was uniformly positive.**

Real Results

These conversations didn't stop with the exchange of feedback. They quickly led to a discussion of current problems. Real issues were resolved and productive agreements were made. In the short term, real problems were solved and in the long term capacity increased. I spoke with a number of employees who told me they heard feedback that no one had ever told them before and that the conversations had been the best professional development experience of their careers.

TEAM FEEDBACK AT A HIGH-TECH START-UP

At "TelecomSupplier" a commitment to direct feedback was built into the company's DNA from the very start. The 4 founders met at Stanford Business School and started the company right after graduation in 2000. Early on they realized that to be successful, all of them would need to grow in their jobs. At Stanford they had taken a class that involved group feedback and decided to replicate the process for themselves. This was the start of a practice that persists to this day and has cascaded down through the company as it has grown.

Do It Now

The 4 founders are all very action and results oriented, so as soon as the idea of giving feedback was suggested they sat down and did it on the spot. As spontaneous as it was, they took a few minutes to set some basic groundrules.

Groundrules for giving feedback:

1. You must have the intent to be helpful to the other. No gamesmanship, no blaming, no playing "gotcha".

2. You must give concrete examples of behavior that illustrate your feedback.
3. Focus on just the most important things – 2 to 3 things the other does well and 2 to 3 things you'd like to see them do better or differently.

Groundrules for receiving feedback:

1. You may ask questions for clarification to understand the feedback more fully, but otherwise you just listen.
2. No defending, arguing, or explaining.

Follow Through

As the groundrules might suggest, this was a tough session. In spite of that, all 4 agreed to do it regularly. **Today the senior team of 8 goes offsite for a full day every quarter for the sole purpose of giving each other feedback.** In addition to individual feedback they also assess how they are working as a team, in terms of business results as well as how they interact with each other. Team members take this very seriously and typically spend 3 or 4 hours the day before preparing their feedback for each other.

Driving Performance

When new VPs join the senior team they are often startled by how serious and blunt the feedback is, but they quickly realize how powerfully this feedback drives company performance. Four years after it was founded TelecomSupplier has survived the telecom downturn. It is profitable, well-funded, and growing rapidly. When I interviewed the senior team for a case study, several of them told me they saw their feedback process as an important part of their competitive advantage. It creates a culture where:

- * Problems are addressed directly
- * If you don't fix a problem you hear about it 3 months later in front of your peers
- * Everyone has room for improvement
- * Senior people get just as much feedback as everyone else (if not more)
- * Facing, and fixing, problems is a core discipline of the senior team

MANY APPROACHES, SAME OUTCOME

These are just two examples. I've seen a wide range of approaches and flavors. Some organizations are ultra touchy-feely and relationship oriented, while others are very cool and analytical. Different cultures require different approaches, but what they all have in common is a structured approach to direct feedback that improves business outcomes.

III. FINAL THOUGHTS: From Feedback to Problem Solving

The Direct Approach

Once people experience the value of direct feedback, they find other ways to be more direct. Managers at TelecomSupplier don't wait for the quarterly offsite to address problems. When a problem comes up, they go directly to the source and say something along the lines of:

"Here is the problem as I see it. What is going on from your perspective? What am I doing that gets in the way? And what can we both do to fix the problem?"

I like the way one mid-level manager at TelecomSupplier put it:

"Feedback is essential to our success. Without it you can spend weeks d*cking around without solving the problem."

[This may seem unnecessarily blunt, but isn't it quicker than dancing round and round the issue?]

Honesty

My own experience is that increasing the quality and quantity of direct feedback increases the level of honesty in every conversation. Future issues of **Management Shorts** will take a closer look at why this is so as well as how increased honesty benefits the bottom line.

IV. UPDATE: Press Coverage for Acorn Consulting

Press

This week there is a two-page profile on me in the San Jose Business Journal. The focus of the story is on how soft skills impact the bottom line. There are a few typos misquotes. I promise I have never, ever said that "Real success in business is being able to BEAT others". I distinctly remember saying LEAD. [Some would argue that to lead you sometimes have to beat, but that is another discussion . . .] You can read the full text – typos and all – at the link below. Bonus points if you can pick out the other misquotes.

<http://sanjose.bizjournals.com/sanjose/stories/2004/10/18/smallb1.html>

Speaking

On Saturday October 23rd I'll be speaking at the Filipina Summit on "Conundrums of Group Decision Making". More info available at:

www.ffwn.org/FilipinaSummit2004.htm

Are you ready to bring the "virtuous cycle" of direct feedback to your team or company? Give me a call and we'll explore the right approach for your organization.

Until next month . . .

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.
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