

## Creating a Culture of Honest Feedback: A Strategy to Keeping the Organization Healthy



By Richard L. Farnell II

Honest feedback is the breakfast of champions: it allows those who seek and incorporate it to identify their blind spots, increase self-awareness, and become a better version of themselves. Unfortunately, some leaders skip this important “meal” to stay comfortable and avoid criticism that may compromise their psychological well-being.

Failing to receive honest feedback can stunt the growth of leaders and organizations.

Honest feedback enables transparency, in contrast to feedback that is only open to compliments or praises. Consider a person who never gets physical checkups or ignores symptoms of ailments. This type of behavior could potentially create long-term irreversible effects. Similarly, leaders who ignore honest feedback from their employees can hinder performance levels and put organizations at risk, leaving employees unable to trust them.

There is a myriad of reasons some leaders struggle to receive feedback, but a few are especially worth mentioning. First, seeking and enabling feedback requires a willingness to be vulnerable that some leaders lack. Leaders look for trusted employees when eliciting feedback. This process works well if the leaders have a variety of minds to draw from and the feedback loop stays transparent. However, this is often not the case, so it is important for leaders to seek feedback from multiple sources—particularly those they feel can give them unexpected, perhaps even unwanted perspectives.

Second, leaders often fail to respond effectively to feedback. When feedback is ignored, misinterpreted, received defensively, or outright rejected, relationships and atmospherics within the workplace are negatively impacted.

Third, some leaders like to control the narrative about themselves, and this tendency can get in the way of the leader receiving productive criticism. One person's image should not supersede the welfare of the organization. Good leaders welcome feedback and understand what got them there will not always be the same thing that will make them successful.

Regardless of the quality of the leader, poor feedback channels can be risky, and honest feedback channels can be developed without risking or jeopardizing relationships. Here are some strategies to set the conditions for honest feedback.

1. **Do not underestimate the expertise, knowledge, and intelligence of employees.**

One of the biggest pitfalls of some leaders is that their ascension to the top gives them “airplane ear,” which impairs their ability to hear what is going on across their organization. Instead, leaders should take a humble approach, proactively and openly seeking insight from all levels, as various insights are imperative for growth.

2. **Spend time with your team and encourage transparency.** Employees will not provide honest feedback until they trust you. They will need to hear you repeatedly and openly elicit feedback. Your team will also be more apt to provide feedback after observing your receptiveness to criticism. If the leader shows appreciation and a desire to understand without defensiveness or retaliation, employees will recognize this and be more comfortable in openly providing feedback.

3. **If a leader is to receive feedback, he or she should acknowledge it, and make the applicable adjustments.** Employees will observe whether or not the leader makes the suggested changes. If nothing changes, employees will be less likely to expend the time and effort required to provide feedback in the future. Therefore, when a leader receives feedback, it should be shared with the appropriate team. Following, a plan of action should be publicized; outlining the steps the leader intends to take to make necessary changes. Additionally, it is important the leader follows up and report outcomes, allowing employees the opportunity to see that their feedback was taken seriously.

4. **Be approachable.** Employees observe whom their leaders spend the most time with and how comfortable they are around different personalities, genders, and ethnicities. A leader must be mindful of how he or she treats that very vocal employee: does the

leader keep their distance from that individual, while gravitating towards employees who are considered safe or those who only tell their superiors what he or she may want to hear? A leader should not be afraid to spend more time with employees whom they are not naturally inclined to correspond.

- 5. Model the behavior you want your team to follow.** Leaders must seek opportunities to provide feedback to team members in a constructive manner and establish a model for the team to follow. Additionally, a leader should encourage team members to provide feedback to each other. The more the team provides feedback to each other, the more likely this type of communication will become commonplace. Once that happens, the stress around providing feedback diminishes, and it will be a more natural occurrence.
- 6. Practice footprint-circulation.** It is common for busy leaders to get overwhelmed by their schedules, but systematically circulating and maintaining the pulse of the organization will pay huge dividends. Leaders often get feedback that has been massaged or diluted by their advisors. If leaders periodically circulate, they are more likely to build trust and diversify their inputs, as well as get direct feedback from a variety of perspectives. This process then minimizes the potential of distorted feedback. The leader is also able to observe whether the advisor inputs coincide with the interactions that have taken place during circulation. Employees are more trusting when they know their boss cares about the group or organization in its entirety.

Creating a culture of honest feedback can be challenging, but if leaders set conditions to open up channels that will help them determine the pulse of the organization, they will be best positioned to guide the team. Moreover, they will better gauge how their decisions and actions are affecting those around them. Without transparency, leaders are haphazardly

guiding without truly understanding the health of the organization. Much like the individual who ignores lingering symptoms, poor health does not get better over time without awareness and a plan of action. Hence, leaders should take their feedback systems seriously.

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