

COMPLEXITIES IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS

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This paper builds off of the article, *Power Talk*, which describes the basic feedback model.* In many cases, sticking with one's own reality and using the four variations for giving feedback can lead to the other considering the feedback with some form of successful resolution. Giving and receiving feedback does not have to be an agonizing process that requires careful planning. It should be part of day-to-day interaction at work, with friends and acquaintances.

But it is not always the case that the giving of feedback goes so smoothly. Even when attempting to be helpful, there are times when feedback is met with denial, defensiveness and resistance. This paper looks at those more difficult times. We will examine the conditions that *increase* resistance as well as how such resistance can be handled. This discussion will be within the framework of steps in the feedback process. While this is described in sequential, linear terms, reality is rarely so cleanly organized. Frequently, it is necessary to return to an earlier stage. Or there might be times when a certain stage is not needed. For example, just mentioning one's concern and the impact of the other's behavior might be enough to cause the other to change so that "joint problem-solving" is not required. The giving and receiving of feedback is very much of an organic process and the steps laid out here is meant to cover the range of potential options, not to be a rigid "cook-book" approach.

For illustrative purposes, let's imagine that there is a peer of yours – a co-worker, friend, or significant other – who does something that is bothering you. This is somewhat of a touchy issue so you don't think it would work just to say, "cut that out; that annoys me."

STEP 1: STATEMENT OF SEVERITY OF THE PROBLEM

It is important to start with a statement of the problem, "John, I want to talk to you about something that you are doing that is bothering me and that is" This approach is preferable to starting by asking questions, "John, do you notice that you tend to interrupt? Why do you do that?" While inquiry is a crucial *second* step, to start with questions is asking the other to open up and be vulnerable when we haven't opened up about our feelings. When there is trust in the relationship, doing the latter may not cause difficulties, but in other cases it can make John suspicious ("I wonder what David is really saying? Where is he coming from?"), and thereby likely to produce a more guarded and defensive reactions.

STEP 2: POWER OF TRUE INQUIRY

This is the process of really trying to understand why the other person is acting that way. It is a process of curiosity, not of accusation. Rather than, "And why [the hell] are *you again* doing *that!*" (which is more a statement than a question), it is holding the mindset that the other is an

Appendix A in **Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership** by David L. Bradford & Allan R. Cohen. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998

intelligent, well-intentioned person and you are puzzled that they would engage in behavior that is not only bothering you, but hurting them? Your goal is to move from just being concerned with yourself, to fully understanding them. And doing so requires that they tell you – not that you guess.

The orientation of inquiry produces multiple benefits. First of all, you are acknowledging that you don't have all the answers. In fact, you only have half the story – how the other's behavior is affecting you. And you need the other half -- their intentions and motivations. Also, most of us want to be understood and inquiry, rather than accusation, conveys that you really want to know them. The other benefit is that it gives you crucial information that increases the probability that the other will consider your feedback. It is likely that they will state their intentions (goals) which lets you point out how their behavior is not meeting these goals.

True inquiry can only work when: a) we aren't so angry with the other that we don't care to understand; b) when we really don't think we know why the other is acting that way; and c) when we really do want to know. These conditions often aren't met when we have been holding back our feelings to the point where they have grown from being *mildly bothered* to *really upset*. Compounding that is our tendency to try to “figure John out” – to assess his intentions, motivations, and even his personality. Because we are upset, we tend to impute negative characteristics and only take account of data that confirms our hypothesis. When this occurs, the buildup of negative feelings causes the feedback to have a strong accusatory edge because the statement is made more out of anger than with the intention of really wanting to help. (Plus the statement is likely to be loaded with many negative attributions since that is the conclusion we have drawn.) It is these accusatory statements that increases defensiveness and lowers acceptance.

One of the benefits of the *Interpersonal Cycle* described in ***Power Talk***, is that one doesn't need to fully understand the other – certainly not their personality and not even their motives or intentions. It is only necessary to be aware of their behavior and the effect that behavior has on you. This means that you can raise the issue early before your concern for the other has turned into rejection. When the other believes that you care for them – that you are on their side – they will be much more open to your feedback.

It sometimes happens that fully understanding why the other acts as they do is sufficient. If John said, “growing up the youngest of 6 children, I had to interrupt a lot to be heard. It has grown into a habit, it is not about you.” Maybe that would be sufficient to decrease one's annoyance and to even tolerate that behavior.

But that happens a minority of times. Often the process is more complicated. What if they don't take the issue as seriously as you do?

STEP 3: “FELT NEED”

Fundamentally, *people change when it is in their best interest*. They do not change for you. Even when a manager says to an employee, “I'm upset at your actions” and the direct report modifies his behavior, it still can be due to that person realizing that, irrespective of the content of the issue, the power differential makes change to be in his best interest. This is why the 2nd and 3rd variations on the basic feedback model (“Your behavior is not meeting your goals” and

“Your behavior is costly to you”) can be so potent and works when the giver of feedback doesn’t have position power over the recipient.

But what if you get into inquiry and the other says, “what’s the big deal.” (Or even worse, “you are just too sensitive, get over it.”) Fear of such responses can cause us not to raise the issue in the first place. Now it might be that the other person cares about you and the relationship so upon hearing that you are bothered might be enough to cause them to not be dismissive and instead take in your comments. That is why the first form of feedback (“This is how your behavior is affecting me”) is so important. But what if that concern for you is not there? Or isn’t strong enough for them to be willing to take a hard look at their behavior. In that case, it might be necessary to “raise the ante” – to increase the felt need on their part -- so that they are willing to look at this issue.

This process of escalation may involve pointing out how their behavior isn’t meeting their espoused goals. (It also helps if they previously have expressed puzzlement about others’ responses – “I wonder why people tend to argue with me?” Then you can link your feedback to those concerns.) Or it might be necessary to point out the “costs” they are paying for their actions. A useful guideline is, *if the other person’s behavior is bothering you, it is likely to be costly to them*. If so, have you thought ahead of time what those costs might be? Does John’s interrupting causes others to tend to tune him out, to argue back, and to discount what he says?

It is best to start with the minimum comment that will bring John to the discussion table – not to hit him over the head with all your points (which you are likely to do if your anger has been stored up). And, if the minimum doesn’t work, then to escalate until he is willing to take the issue seriously; where he sees that it is in his best interest to explore what might be an uncomfortable issue.

[Note: sometimes Step 2 and 3 need to be reversed. This is necessary when the other brushes off your initial raising of the issue so isn’t likely to be willing to do much disclosure about why they acted as they did. What is important, in building the felt need, is that this doesn’t get into a mutual accusation game causing you to forget about inquiry.]

STEP 4: SURFACING ALL THE ISSUES

This next step can be felt as messy. It is possible that there will be some mutual recriminations (“well, it is because *you* do X that I have to do Y!”). The point to remember is that this process can’t all be clean and antiseptic and having it be messy isn’t a sign of failure or a clue to give up. Frequently, there is the wish, *if I do this just right, say exactly the right words, it will be easy with no complications*. This sometimes occurs, but when it’s about an important issue, the interaction is usually more complicated. There are several reasons for this:

- Remember that inter-personal problems often have an inter-personal component. That is, it is not unlikely that you might have done something that compounded the issue. (And if you aren’t willing to look at that, why should the other look at their part?)
- The issue may be different than what you first expected. Remember, you have only your perspective and the other’s view may redefine the problem. Is the issue really that John

interrupts too much or that the decision-making process is so slow that his behavior comes out of his frustration?

- Even if the first two variables aren't at play, if this is a significant issue, it is a bit much to expect that change will be instantaneous. If the other has engaged in a set of behaviors for decades, they are unlikely to immediately take in the feedback. Instead, they are likely to feel the need for self-justification and give all the reasons why you are mistaken and why change is unnecessary.

Think of the image of crossing a swamp. At first, one searches out the rocks to step on (the right words to say) that keep mud off our boots. But at a certain point, the rocks end and it does get messy. [This is not to imply one should throw mud at the other!] That is not the danger point; instead there are two other dysfunctional outcomes. One is that escalation grows so high that one of the parties says something they will later regret. However, this is far less common than the other danger which is deciding to back off rather than pressing forward. In the latter case the problem isn't solved. Leaving it hanging usually results in some degree of estrangement. But if one sticks with the basic model (of behavior and effects), then it is usually possible to get through the swamp to the high ground of a mutually satisfying resolution. But the process isn't clean and it isn't linear.

[Note: There might be some times when it is important to call a "time out." One or both parties have gotten locked into their position and they would need some time to get over it. But what is important is that a specific time is set to come back to the issue, not that one backs off permanently. It might be enough to say, "let's both think about this issue and what we want and come back to discuss it tomorrow."]

While this can be an uncomfortable period, its importance is in getting all the issues out. These issues aren't just the objective facts, but how the issues have become symbolic. Are you bothered at John's interrupting because you take it as a sign that he doesn't respect you? Is John upset at your feedback because he doesn't feel accepted by you? It is usually the symbolic meaning of events, not the events themselves, that are the hooks that catch other people.

STEP 5: MOVING INTO JOINT PROBLEM-SOLVING

How does one get through the swamp? Sometimes after each person has fully stated their feelings, concerns and issues, they are ready to move on. And sometimes when each identifies what is the symbolic hook behind the affronting behavior, then the behavior becomes less the issue. But at other times, other approaches may be needed. One option is to talk about what is good about the relationship that each person values. This moves the discussion from "what's wrong" to "what's good." "John, you have a lot of good ideas and I really want to be able to hear them, but it's really difficult when you interrupt me. What can we work out?" Another approach, borrowed from Negotiation Theory, is to have each party move beyond "positions" to "needs." What does each person need from the other?

Sometimes people resist accepting the feedback because they fear that doing so would require giving up an important part of themselves. What is often the case is that our weakness is our strength carried to an excess -- we get into trouble because we overuse what we are good at. In a certain sense, John's interrupting could be a sign that he gets highly engaged in the conversation

and wants to join in. Better that than totally ignoring you. But he is now overdoing it. Stating it this way can make it easier for the recipient of feedback to hear the message. It isn't that they are necessarily doing something "bad" (or that they have to totally give up that aspect of their behavior). Rather, it is a matter of reining it in and using those skills more appropriately.

What is important is to move beyond a win-lose stance to search for a win-win outcome. In that, it is important that each party know specifically what is being agreed to. The danger is that the effort to avoid what is felt as this tense interaction leads both parties to couch their agreements in generalities ("I'll try to do better") causing each person to walk away with a different interpretation of what has been resolved. Then when the disputed behavior appears again, one's anger at John only intensifies.

STEP 6: FOLLOW UP

When we have gathered our courage to raise a difficult, even contentious issue with another, we hope that the other will "get the message" and change. A trap is subsequently to only focus on what they do wrong. But learning theory tells us that reinforcement works much better than punishment. Try to look for signs that the other is trying to change. Their new behavior may not be perfect, but acknowledging their effort may produce better results than pointing out where they have fallen short.

But change in habitual behavior is not easy. It might be expecting too much to think that one conversation will change years of repetitive behavior and it is not unlikely that John will have slipped back to his old patterns. Often, it is the second conversation that can have the most impact. Rather than holding back and judgmentally concluding that he had no intention of changing, raise the issue again. "John, you are doing again what we talked about" may be enough of a reminder.

SOME ADDITIONAL POINTS

Defensiveness – We are often concerned about raising difficult issues because of fear the other will become defensive. But what do we mean by defensiveness? Is it when the other person denies they do it as much as you claim? When they offer excuses? When they point out that you do something similar (or different, but just as annoying)? We would suggest that isn't *problematic* defensiveness (instead, that is part of the "messy period").

Think of the alternative. What if you give somebody some difficult feedback and they were to say, "Thank you very much. I never realized that. I will change immediately." Would you believe them?

There is a difference between *being so defensive that I can't hear your comment* and *defending ourselves*. No one of us likes to be misunderstood or misjudged. Maybe John is afraid that you are drawing the conclusion that he doesn't hear or care about your comments. Maybe he is afraid that you consider him an inconsiderate lout. What might appear as defensiveness might be just responding to his needs. That doesn't mean that he isn't taking in your statements. In a certain sense, his struggling with your feedback might be a sign that it is slowly settling in – the hook is getting set.

The important thing is not to be put off by these behaviors. Having somebody consider problematic behavior is not easy. What is important is whether you can persist, in a caring, but direct way. Keep in mind that while you are responding to your own needs in giving feedback, this is also potentially helpful to the other – and that is why it is important to keep reiterating that their actions are not in their best interest.

“It’s my personality; I can’t change. It’s how I was raised; it’s my culture – The important distinction here is between *personality* and *behavior*. While it is extremely difficult to change personality, we have much more control over our behavior – and it is behavior that we are talking about because influencing behavior should be the concern of the manager. It’s true that our culture, how we were raised, how we are socialized, our past experiences, etc., make some behavioral change easier than others, but just because it is difficult doesn’t make it impossible.

When a person says, “I can’t,” consider having them rephrase that in terms of “I choose not to” because it is a choice. It may be difficult for them to change, but they are still choosing not to. This is where it can be useful to point out the costs of their sticking with their previous behavior and ask them whether they are willing to pay that cost? The issue is often, “Do you want to be comfortable or do you want to be effective?”

The problem is now with the feedback process itself -- Let’s say that you raise an issue around a certain behavior. But in getting into discussing the issue, the other is behaving in a very difficult way (they are really becoming highly defensive and might even be responding in a punitive way). There is now a new issue to deal with which is the difficulty in this feedback process.

But the same approach works. How are you feeling about these behaviors and how is it affecting you? It might be necessary to signal a change in subject. “Mary, let’s set aside for a minute how angry you get in meetings. I need to talk about how you are responding now.” (And one follows the same model in sharing the impact on you, how is it now meeting Mary’s goals, how is it costly to Mary, etc.)

You are receiving feedback and the other is “way over the net.” – Most of the people you meet aren’t as skilled in this feedback process and are likely to make all sorts of attributions about your intentions, motives and even personality. (“It’s because you are insecure and power-hungry that is causing you to raise this issue!”)

Your first task is to keep your defensiveness down (and certainly your desire to retaliate). Instead, use the model. Can you “deconstruct” their statement and say something like, “that is not my intention [e.g. my reality], but clearly I am doing something [my behavior] that is causing you to draw that conclusion [your reality]. What exactly am I doing?” Your statement drives the discussion down to observable behavior. That is much easier to deal with.

IN CONCLUSION

We don’t argue that giving and receiving feedback is easy. If it were, it wouldn’t be so rare. What we are arguing is that it is much more possible than most people think. What it takes is following the model and being persistent. Good Luck.