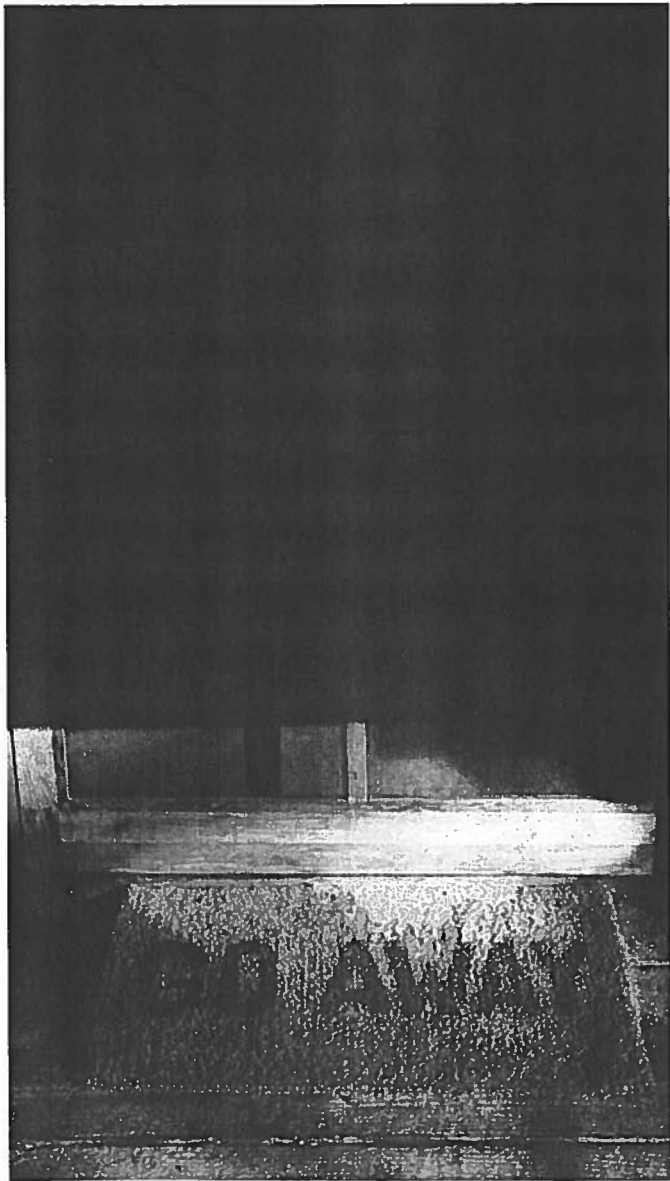


When Your Employee Doesn't Take Feedback

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

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In my decade as a leadership coach, I have heard countless versions of the same concern from my clients – committed leaders who understand the importance of giving actionable feedback to their team members – who find themselves thwarted when the person receiving it acts out, shuts down, or fails to follow through on promises. These managers can *give* feedback but can't make their people *take* it. Or can they?

“I need to give Tom feedback on his communication skills, but every time I try, he gets defensive.”

“Whenever I schedule a performance review with Ellen, she calls in sick.”

“Jamie nods her head when I tell her how to think more strategically. She ‘yeses’ me to death and promises she’ll do better. But then nothing changes.”

My advice to leaders in these situations is to take a break from giving other performance-related feedback. Instead, start giving feedback on how the employee receives feedback. After all, in today’s fast-changing workplace, a commitment to improvement and growth is just as critical a competency as strategic thinking, communication and collaboration. It should be its own topic of conversation, addressed when you have enough evidence to assume a pattern and when both you and your colleague have adequate time and energy to tackle it. Here’s how to approach the discussion and its aftermath:

- **Make the case.** You and hopefully your employee know that part of your job is to give feedback. But he may not be aware that part of *his* job is to receive your feedback seriously and professionally. Explain impact his resistance has on you, the team, the organization, and his own professional reputation and career trajectory if it continues.
- **Get curious.** You can’t assume that the feedback-receiver sees her behavior in the same way that you do. So instead of leading with lines like “As I’m sure you know, whenever I give you a performance review, you give me one-word responses,” acknowledge that you’re expressing an opinion and want to hear hers too: “In our performance reviews, what are you typically thinking?”
- **Use neutral language.** Want to make someone defensive? Tell him he’s being defensive! Try to avoid words that carry negative connotations and place blame. For example, don’t say “When I give you feedback, I notice you won’t make eye contact” because “won’t” assumes an intention. Instead say, “When I give you feedback, I notice that you look at the floor. I’m curious to know what’s going on for you.” By withholding your judgment and interpretation, you appear more open.
- **Ask for feedback yourself.** You may not be giving your employee what she needs in order to hear, absorb and accept feedback. Perhaps your communication style is too direct, or you offer comments late in the day when she’s trying to get home, or you send mixed messages by too frequently pairing negative feedback with positive. Be brave enough to ask, “How am I contributing to this problem?” and then model how to receive the

feedback.

- **Share a personal story.** Normalize the often-painful experience of receiving feedback by sharing a personal story about a time when you got feedback and didn't take it well or at all. Share the impact of that experience, what you learned from it, and how you've changed as a result.
- **Secure a commitment.** Make a specific request for a behavior change, be open to counter-offers, and come to an agreement on the goal. You might say something like, "So moving forward, here's what I'd like to see happen: I'll give you some feedback and if you feel like you disagree, have a different perspective on it, or that I am not getting the whole picture, you'll tell me that *in the meeting*. I'll agree to really listen to your take on the situation, and we'll come up with a plan together. Does that work for you?"
- **Acknowledge positive change.** As soon as you've had the feedback-about-feedback conversation, start looking for evidence that your employee has taken your advice to heart. Speak up the very first time you notice him acting differently.

A leader's job in giving feedback isn't done when she gives it. It's done when it's received, internalized, and applied. Offering feedback about how to receive feedback is an important step in making that happen.



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