

Honest feedback

Employees can often make great coaches

In a recent newsletter, Mike Jay, master business coach and the founder of Leadership University, suggested that business leaders ask those around them, often subordinates, to provide ongoing feedback.

In that way, he proposed, you would be asking them to coach you, and you could benefit from having several people coaching you in an informal manner, as you navigate your business year.

I like his idea for several reasons. The big reason is that the person at the top usually gets less authentic feedback than anyone else in the organization.

People throughout the organization always have opinions about the leadership. Those opinions are usually only shared with peers, spouses and almost anyone except the one person who could do something about it — the boss. People in most companies are afraid to be straight with the boss, so typically they don't give direct feedback, and certainly not negative feedback. You'd probably hear a lot if you hid a microphone in the restroom — which I do not recommend.

There are some steps you can take to turn that around and create an environment in which people feel safe giving you feedback, which is after all the breakfast of champions.

The first step is to ask for feedback. That may be the biggest hurdle for many leaders. You have to come to terms with whatever obstacles you feel might be in the way of asking. Perhaps you are afraid of what you might hear. Perhaps you have a sense that you would appear to be unsure of yourself. There may be any number of blocks to remove before you can earnestly make that request. It takes courage to elicit honest feedback, but it builds trust.

Then you must demonstrate that you really mean it, that you are ready to listen to feedback from others without being defensive in any way. You are listening to understand.

Feedback isn't always palatable, and it isn't always accurate either. So next you have

to weigh what you hear against everything you know — and might not know — about yourself. This is a tough process. If you're like me, sometimes you'll feel defensive no matter what, and you just want to lick your wounds and reflect on what an idiot that person is who delivered the feedback.

Then we have to take a deep breath and sift through the data to see if there is any gold in there.

If there is, usually it indicates that we need to make a change. So that's the next step. If you choose to make a behavioral change in response to feedback, recognize that it's a tough process and you may be bucking a well-ingrained

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habit. Announce your intention to change and create an action plan to keep you on target with the change. Ask those around you to observe your progress, which is actually asking for more feedback.

If there is a lot of fear in the organization, none of this will make much difference the first time out of the box. Over time, if you are consistent and open, fear will melt down and trust will grow. A side benefit is that performance rises in the organization when this happens.

There is another cool way to get some good coaching without actually hiring a coach. Let's say that you are aware of an area in which you'd like to improve. There's something you want to learn. You happen to know a person in your world, maybe even within

your organization, who has that competency. This person is skilled in that area. She may even appear to be a natural at it. You can request that she coach you — which is usually received as a compliment. Together you can tease out the strategies that she uses to be so effective. I say tease out, since usually people who are so elegant in doing something may be operating with unconscious competency, not even aware of the strategies they've developed.

If she agrees to coach you in that area, then you break down the strategies into practice steps and start to incorporate them into your behavior. You can report back periodically to your new coach, until you feel confident that you have made the competency your own.

I used this exact process in changing a behavior that was causing me and others discomfort and frustration. For much of my life, I was habitually running late (you can ask my children). My husband, Jim, is highly punctual and probably has never been late in his life. So one day I asked him how he did it, what were his strategies for being on time. He didn't have them on the tip of his tongue, but I interviewed him for about an hour and ended up with three pages of notes on a legal pad. He agreed to coach me over the next few weeks, and to my great delight, I made a change that has added enormous ease to my life.

So, coaching opportunities are everywhere. We may have to go out on a limb to reach them. I promise you that it's worth it.



Jo Hawkins Donovan

has a coaching and psychotherapy firm in Whitefish Bay and can be reached at (414) 332-0300, or at jo@hawkinsdonovan.com. The firm's Web site is

www.hawkinsdonovan.com.