

Responding to Feedback

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, April 23, 2011

I've generated several articles detailing the advantages of giving feedback to colleagues, direct reports, and even your boss. But I've not thought to comment on how you as a leader should respond when receiving feedback. This article corrects that oversight.

Responding to feedback volunteered to you is important because if you do it well, you serve as a role model for others in your organization. If, however, you receive feedback poorly, people will tend to not only avoid giving feedback to you, they'll simply avoid giving feedback to anyone. (Yep, your effect on the culture of your organization really is that big!)

I sense that many leaders are more comfortable giving feedback than receiving it. Maybe that's how some leaders perceive "the way things should be." I, however, believe leaders should be more open about receiving feedback than giving it.

First, it's unlikely you'll become a better leader if you don't actively solicit feedback. You have no way of knowing the effect you have on people unless you ask them to share that information with you.

Second is the effect you have as a role model. You can't expect your direct reports to aggressively seek improvement if you are not showing them how to do it and encouraging them to seek the insights of those affected by their actions.

Consider that anyone offering feedback to you is giving you some information from his or her perspective. Imagine that he or she is laying the information on a table. You can pick it up or you can leave it there. Either way, you at least want to express gratitude to the individual for offering it.

There are several ways in which you can receive the feedback without creating expectations. One is to simply say, "Thank you." If that sounds insufficient, expand it to say, "Thank you for sharing that information with me." You've affirmed the person's intentions and acknowledged the information.

If the person's feedback seems like outright criticism, you can always say, "You may be right." You've not admitted anything, and you've allowed yourself to either leave the information right there on the table or to come back later and express further appreciation (if that is appropriate).

Finally, you might say, "I appreciate your suggestion for how I might behave differently in the future." If you are a frequent reader, you know that I often suggest two questions for asking at the end of any activity. "What did we do well?" and "What could we do better next time?" The individual merely answered the second question before you could ask it!

I'm not saying that any of the previous suggestions is easy to do. The feedback might provoke in you some significant emotion. Accept that the person has no choice but to share observations from his or her perspective, which is laden with biases based on individual history, personal values, self-set standards, etc. Prepare yourself now to respond calmly, focusing on what you might learn from the interaction.

Despite the self-centered perspective of the individual, there may be valuable information in what is shared with you. Be careful that your emotions don't cloud your discernment, preventing you from gaining value from the interchange. Prepare yourself now to be bigger than the emotional triggering that the feedback might stimulate.

Let me point out the likelihood of conflicting feedback from different individuals. It occurs all the time. You could easily receive both compliments and complaints for the same behavior. Remember, the perspective comes from the eye of the beholder, and you have many beholders of your activities.

As a leader, you are always in the spotlight. People have lots of opportunity to observe your behaviors and thus, offer you insights on how your behaviors have affected them. If you aren't already receiving lots of feedback, consider making a big change in how often you ask for the perspective of others.

Do you want to be a better leader? Intentionally seek feedback from your direct reports. The best leaders do. They realize they serve the individuals under their authority. How will you know how well you are doing if you don't ask those folks? Failure to seek feedback from direct reports is one of the biggest reasons many leaders don't improve their skills.

Want more information on feedback? Go to www.buildingfutureleaders.com and click on "Article Archives." Put the word "feedback" in the search box. You'll find dozens of additional educational articles there.