The Benefit of Feedback

Stereotypically, organizational leaders are independent, gutsy risk-takers who "shoot from the hip" and rarely admit to making mistakes. They don't care what others think of their approach, they focus on delivering beneficial results, and they sure don't go out of their way to solicit feedback!

Watch out! Stereotypes are incomplete and often inaccurate. Believing in them can get you in trouble! In today's world, respected leaders have learned either the hard way or from available educational material that it is foolish to behave independently in an interdependent reality.

Indeed, our world is deeply interdependent. For example, dozens of individuals--maybe hundreds--have contributed to putting this newspaper article into your hands! Consider those who cut the trees, hauled the wood, built the highway and truck, converted the wood into paper, wrote the stories, generated the electricity that runs the printers, and delivered the finished product--who knows how many different contributors I left out? In life, we depend on many people, both apparent and not so obvious, for the many services and luxuries we take for granted.

(If you are reading this article on a computer or cell phone, you can substitute the electronic equivalent of the hard-copy delivery system I described above.)

How can a leader capitalize on the interdependency of the individuals in his or her organization? I suggest that leaders become very comfortable with soliciting as well as giving helpful feedback. Feedback is a wonderful gift. Let me explain how feedback works and why it is so beneficial.

When I execute any type of behavior, I usually know my motive for taking that initiative or response. And I usually know what result I desire from my action. That is, I know my intended outcomes.

The people affected by my behavior, however, know only what effect my actions have had on them. They have no way of knowing what my motive was in taking that action. Many will speculate of course. Some might ask--if they are gutsy enough. Most will just let the action pass, assuming it is consistent with whatever existing perception they have of me. (As a side benefit, please go to my website (address below) and scroll down to read "Avoiding the Deception of Confirmation Bias.")

Sometimes the effect of my behavior is different from what I had intended. Perhaps my actions have created a problem, made someone uncomfortable, or caused others to inconvenience themselves because they thought I wanted some special treatment. Perhaps my behavior is a significant offense or irritant to some group of people I value as ongoing allies!

If no one lets me know otherwise, I blindly believe that what I intended and the effect of my action are identical. Rarely do leaders take the time to verify if this is indeed the case. Unknown to us, there could easily be a big gap between what we intended and what the other person experienced.

When people care enough to let me know truthfully the effect that my behavior had on them, then I can compare my desired outcome with the actual outcome. If the difference is unacceptable to me or the affected individual, I can choose to apologize, seek forgiveness, and adjust my behaviors in the future to more successfully accomplish what I desire.

Strong leaders encourage the people around them to provide abundant feedback. Leaders observe the quantity and quality of feedback occurring in their organizations, and they seek ideas on how the organization can improve its feedback processes.

Successful organizations work to find a healthy balance in the nature of the feedback that is offered. Not just negative perceptions are communicated. You'll hear many compliments being shared. People like to hear when their actions have been helpful.

A characteristic of a highly effective organizational culture is that feedback is frequently sought and voluntarily provided. Why do people behave that way? Because they genuinely desire that their colleagues be successful. There is no thought of withholding valuable information if you want your coworker to continually improve in both competence and confidence!

Individuals in too many organizations are uncomfortable telling the truth. Leaders of some cultures have inadvertently encouraged denying, ignoring, or pretending. Finding out the truth of what's genuinely going on in such a culture can be extremely frustrating and confusing.

Can you change your organization's culture single-handedly? Probably not. But you can influence others by choosing to be a role model in your efforts to give and receive feedback. Others will likely notice your behaviors and choose to do the same, and that's what leadership is all about!