Why I Don't Like Anonymous Feedback

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Why do you advocate feedback in your organization? You probably want to give people the information they need to improve their contributions.

For that to happen, doesn't the feedback recipient have to understand what's being communicated?

I think that happens best when one person looks another person in the eye and says, "When you did _____, I felt (or I saw the effect as being) _____." The person receiving the feedback can ask questions, such as, "Help me remember that situation; what were we doing when that happened? Why didn't you say something about this at the time? What do you think I could have done differently?"

If both individuals are authentic, with good intentions, communication occurs. The person receiving the feedback knows a lot more about his or her impact on others than before the conversation.

Systematizing this effort has created a "360 degree" feedback process. This is the collection of information from a person's direct reports, peers, bosses, customers, and suppliers. Early versions required extensive manual collation. Feedback providers now input their observations directly to the internet. The information results in a summary report provided to the individual and his or her boss.

Companies that market these services make a big deal about how the identity of the person providing information is kept confidential. The presumption is that people will be more honest if they know the person receiving the information won't be able to identify them individually.

I'll skip my debate with that point for the moment. If you've ever received one of these feedback reports, you know that your first thought when you read something interesting is, "Who said this?"

Why do you want to know? You want to understand the point being made, but you don't have enough context to even recall the event. You'd like to learn more, but you don't know who to ask. You have a potential new insight that you can't fully process. The summary report is inadequate and frustrating.

A year later, when feedback sheets are distributed again, you'll likely push back, cynically resisting the process and giving your piece of it something less than your best effort.

Now, let me come back to that "more honest" contention. I don't believe it. Even if it's true, however, when you take the personal accountability out of the process (by removing the personal contact), many feedback providers are less careful and complete in providing the requested information. Therefore, what the feedback recipient obtains is a less thorough and beneficial package of information.

Let's take another look at that "more honest" contention. What kind of culture invites employees to be honest with each other only when they can avoid direct communication? Do you really want to promote a continuation of that presumption? In the healthiest of organizations, individuals routinely seek and volunteer lots of informal feedback. Robust cultures thrive on collaborative interpersonal relations.

I've offered my two biggest reasons against anonymous feedback. The short-term negative is that anonymity delivers poor quality information to the feedback recipients. The longer-term negative is an unintentional degradation of the quality of the organization's interpersonal relationships and culture.

You might ask, "What do you recommend instead, Dennis?" I quickly would respond, "Any feedback process that encourages eye-to-eye, frank interpersonal dialogue."

Let me add that I think it is hugely valuable to obtain feedback from direct reports, peers, customers, and suppliers in addition to the person's boss. Here's what I would advocate as the best of both worlds.

Personally deliver to each of your feedback providers a feedback form. While in the presence of that person, have him or her give you the requested information while also entering it into the computer.

This allows you to take notes and ask all your relevant questions while also satisfying your boss who will receive a copy of the summary information report. You'll be able to have a far healthier conversation with your boss about the meaning of the information and your plans to respond.

"But that takes too much time," you might argue. Granted, it's a tradeoff. Are you willing to consume more time for more complete and usable information? I think it's worth it, but you make the choice.

There are other ways to obtain in-person feedback. You just need to be creative in meeting the needs of both the feedback providers and the feedback recipients.

For example, I recently facilitated three direct reports providing very explicit feedback in person, in a group, to their Executive Director. All agreed the process went smoothly, they were able to say all they wanted to say, and the information received was constructive and actionable. The relationships among the individuals were greatly strengthened by the process.

The objective is to provide high quality information that allows the feedback recipient to improve his or her behavior. I have not yet seen anonymous feedback accomplish that desired outcome!

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