

A Great Feedback Question: How Can I Do Better?

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What would a trained outside observer find in your organization relative to the quantity and quality of feedback being sought and offered? Stated another way, do folks in your organization ask for feedback? Do they offer feedback to their teammates? Do they volunteer feedback to you?

Please ponder those questions before you read further. If you have a colleague who also cares about the health of your organization, please ask him or her to consider these questions along with you. If you have a leadership team, consider engaging them, too.

You might ask, "Hey, Dennis, why is this important?" Great question. A huge difference exists between organizations that just survive and those that approach genuine excellence.

Think about it. Doesn't it just make sense that in cultures where intentional improvement is cherished, people would seek information from people who know them well? I'm not talking about a formal annual performance review. I'm suggesting that individuals simply ask their teammates for observations.

Look, you may be doing everything you know how to do. But are you performing at your max? Of course not. How do you get better? You enlist the perspective of a collaborator! A teammate who works with you every day could easily have a valuable suggestion. All he or she would need is a bit of encouragement to share.

If feedback is not occurring in your organization, what can you as the leader do? You can personally serve as a terrific role model and gain some great information at the same time.

A common stereotype is that feedback flows downhill in organizations. That is, bosses typically give feedback to those under their authority. Often that kind of feedback feels very judgmental, which is why the concept of feedback carries a negative connotation for many people.

What you're going to do instead is bust that stereotype to pieces. For the next several months, you're going to aggressively seek feedback from colleagues and members of your team. Believe me, it will take at least that long to cause people to be comfortable giving you feedback. Along the way, you'll learn a lot!

I realize you may not yet know how to solicit feedback. It's not hard, though I admit it may feel uncomfortable at first. Simply gather two or three individuals in a neutral area (not in your office, which is much too formal). Tell them you want their honest thoughts about your work. Then ask them simply, "How can I do better?"

Expect a stunned silence for a few moments. Remember, if this feels weird to you, it feels even weirder to them! They're trying to figure out just what you're doing and why you're doing it. Further, they are evaluating if they should take advantage of this opportunity (or if they risk some negative repercussion for telling you the truth!).

Read their body language. Address their questions. They'll want to know, "Why are you doing this?"

Answer simply. "I want to do a better job of serving you and the rest of our organization. The only way I know how to do that is to ask."

Ask your question again, perhaps in a slightly different way. "What can I do to better serve you and the rest of our organization?" At this stage, look expectantly at the individuals, pick up a pencil or pen, and jot down notes of what they say. Keep your mouth shut, listen, and make notes. Promise only that you'll go away and think about their comments. Then very genuinely say, "Thank you!"

Do this three or four times a week for a month and you'll learn a lot. Share your experience with other leaders in the organization and invite them to try the same thing. Ask them to report to you what they learn about themselves and about soliciting feedback. Within three months, six at the most, you'll be astounded at the beneficial effect on you and on your organization!