

Delivering What Might Be Esteem-Shattering Feedback

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What do you do when you observe a colleague behaving in ways that create problems for others? You realize the intentions are probably honorable, but the actions are having negative effects. Others may have confided in you because they don't have the confidence to deliver the information themselves.

You appreciate how important feedback is to growing leaders. You really want to get the message across to your friend and teammate, but you know the news is not going to sit well. Maybe you've even tried to communicate some or part of your message, but you weren't successful.

In a recent article, I described how we humans tend to justify and rationalize unattractive feedback. When confronted with a perspective that challenges our self-esteem, we have a tendency to defend ourselves. (Oh, yes, we do like to look good!) Sharing what you know probably feels a bit risky.

If your friend becomes angry, the confrontation could damage your relationship. Still, you think the effort is worthwhile. How do you share your concerns such that your comments are taken seriously?

First, challenge your own motivations. Who will benefit by you delivering your message? Yes, there likely will be some short-term pain for your colleague and maybe even for you. What will be the longer-term effect on your organization if you are successful? Make sure that you don't have any underlying selfishness--that you are not trying to glorify yourself by sharing what you know.

Next, examine your information. Be sure that the problem you've observed is actually limiting the effectiveness of the person. If your evidence is weak, wait until you gather confirming information.

If you still think it's appropriate to offer your information, watch for an opportune time. Never deliver the unattractive feedback in the midst of an emotional incident. You may be tempted to say something like, "Look, what you're doing is a great example of the very thing that I've been meaning to tell you!"

I promise, in the heat of the situation, the person will not be receptive. On the contrary, your words will merely fuel the fire, and the person will resist considering your content and probably be angry with you!

If the information is as important as you claim, it can stand on its own. Select an opportunity when you expect no extreme emotions. A routine meeting is often an appropriate time.

Ask permission to share your observations. Why? First, it's a courtesy. Second, it may take a few moments for the person to realize this conversation is different from the normal, everyday problem-solving and planning that you do all the time. Catching the person by surprise is likely to cause an increase in defensiveness (and maybe even cause the person to stop listening completely).

Phrase your observation in terms of how people are affected by the behaviors. You can do this best by describing how you and others feel when your colleague behaves as he or she does.

It may be tempting to suggest what your friend should do instead. Wait to offer options until you are invited to do so. If you share alternatives prematurely, before your friend is ready, you will simply make it easier for your counsel to be rejected.

If your effort to communicate this important information fails the first time, be persistent. It's probably not easy for your teammate to hear the news you are sharing. Obtain a second person, someone your colleague also respects, who has observed the damaging effects of his or her behaviors. It's much harder to deny two individuals who are delivering the same observations.

Feedback is valuable! In the healthiest of organizations, individuals volunteer and seek feedback routinely. It's tempting (and seems so easy) to pass up the opportunity to provide feedback, especially when you know it won't be accepted graciously. It's worth planning and practicing your delivery. Your colleague will thank you later for taking the risk, and your organization will likely be better off for it!