

Receiving Pride-Shattering Feedback

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Feedback is valuable! In the healthiest organizations, individuals volunteer and seek feedback routinely. Feedback affirms and reinforces beneficial behaviors and attributes. It also initiates and supports improvement in characteristics and activities that aren't as favorable.

Occasionally, however, someone comes to you with frank, unattractive feedback about some damaging effects of actions that you believe are perfectly acceptable, even desirable. From your perspective, your intentions have been honorable. It's hard to accept that your helpful behaviors may have had some detrimental effect on others.

Like many of us in leadership roles, you genuinely believe, "What I do is logical and rational. What this person is telling me just doesn't fit with what I know is true." You feel there must be a huge mistake, and you feel compelled to explain why your actions are both appropriate and beneficial.

Following is a true story, offered for your edification. The names have been changed to protect identities. However, the circumstances are very similar to what you've recently faced---or likely will experience, perhaps soon.

You may find yourself sometimes in the role of "Kate," the feedback provider. Though it hurts in the short term when you are obstinate "Dan," the feedback receiver, the benefits in the long run are superb!

May your colleagues love and respect you so much that they tell you the hard things you need to hear!

Dan and Kate have been colleagues for years. They have a high level of mutual respect, and they love collaborating on tough issues. They complement each other's strengths and creative ideas. The quality of their work individually is superb. Together, however, they are unbeatable.

Kate, on too many occasions, had observed Dan making comments and taking actions that tarnished his relationships with people important to him. Whenever she saw the effect of his behaviors on those individuals, Kate tried in a variety of ways to communicate her observations.

Despite having great admiration for Kate, Dan responded to her scrutiny by explaining (to her, it was "justifying") his rationale. To Dan, he was just sharing his thought process and describing his intentions, as he often did with Kate on other topics. He had no idea that he was rejecting Kate's feedback.

Even when Kate kept pushing him, explaining the negative effect his actions had--even on her--Dan thought his conduct seemed logical and appropriate. In fact, Dan was frustrated that Kate, the person with whom he had collaborated on so many sensitive issues, seemed unable to comprehend his logic.

Kate cared enough not to give up. Despite knowing Dan's pride would take a short-term hit, she sought the help of another associate Dan respected. They made sure they were truly motivated to help Dan by pushing this information. Together they confronted Dan again with their forthright feedback.

Imagine Dan's frustration! He felt Kate and their mutual friend had ganged up on him. He couldn't understand why they now both refused to accept the legitimacy of his reasoning.

You can probably guess where this is going. Kate and her colleague finally got Dan's attention. After he spent some time objectively considering their perspective, he sheepishly accepted the legitimacy of their concerns. Only after he had become aware of their insights could he dispassionately evaluate his behaviors from the other person's point of view.

“Awareness” was the key, as it often is when huge breakthroughs occur. Dan now realizes, in retrospect, that because of his inflated ego, he failed to “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” (This extremely beneficial counsel is habit five of Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.)

As leaders sometimes do, Dan’s pride prevented him from listening to the people he respects most. Dan apologized deeply to Kate and to the other individuals he had unintentionally hurt over the years. Further, he is now making progress in replacing those dysfunctional behaviors with healthier ones.

Self-deception can occur for any of us. It’s easy to fall into the trap of believing that you are open and enthusiastically willing to accept feedback. Yet you may actually discount the new information, keeping yourself unaware, especially when what you hear conflicts with your view of the circumstances.

When that occurs, please remember Dan’s obstinance. Because providing candid feedback is so difficult, your colleagues would surely let this situation pass if they thought it unimportant. Those who work with you on other issues are usually willing to work with you on your issues, too!

You may have to jettison your urge to rationally justify your behaviors. Explain why you did what you’ve done only if that’s what was requested. (Hint: it often isn’t.) Instead, work to explain what’s been expressed to you so clearly that your feedback providers can easily proclaim, “Yes, I am convinced that you understand what I’m telling you.”

You will likely need the ongoing support of your friends and teammates, and especially direct reports. Habitual behavior does not change easily. Ask them to celebrate and reinforce your new conduct, and encourage them to correct you if they see you lapse back into former practices.

We all know it’s hard to consider feedback about something you’d rather not admit about yourself. Your colleagues aren’t attacking you; they want to help you be more effective. Despite knowing the short-term potential of hurting your pride, they sincerely care about your improvement over the long-term. Let them partner with you on this issue, as they’ve collaborated with you on so many others.

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