

## **Why You Don't Find Out What You Need to Know**

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2020, published in the Oct, Nov, Dec, 2020 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

Does anyone in your organization offer you deeply thoughtful feedback? You are blessed if you have such a relationship! Most of your team members probably don't share their thoughts about you as a leader. Is their silence malicious? Do they intentionally withhold information that might be helpful to you? What causes them to go silent when you ask for their experiences in dealing with you?

I doubt their failure to share their observations is malevolent. Let me offer an illustrative situation that could easily happen in your home. You're pensive. Your husband (or wife) notices you are concentrating deeply and asks curiously, "What are you thinking about?"

You answer vacantly, "Nothing." He (or she) pushes no further and leaves you to your thoughts.

Have you just lied? I realize that's a strong accusation for what just happened. You probably wouldn't choose that word to describe the incident. If your spouse pushed you, you might explain your ponderings. Or you might have said that nothing you were considering was worth explaining just now. The ideas you were examining might be worth sharing later, once they were more cohesive.

Or maybe it would be hard to put all your thoughts into words. Further, maybe you're not sure exactly where you're headed with these thoughts. You may even be surprised or even embarrassed at how some of the thoughts had come into your mind.

Further, you might feel embarrassed that you're not engaged in something more productive. Maybe you wonder if this is the best use of your time. Maybe you don't want to expose your thoughts to the scrutiny of your spouse just yet.

Those may all be valid reasons for not sharing your thoughts. The truth is, however, that you were indeed deeply deliberating. Whatever the reason, you chose not to communicate with your husband or wife at that exact moment. It's not an unusual scenario, is it?

Let's go back to the focus of this article. Now you're the inquisitive one asking people who see you function every day, "What are your thoughts about my work? How do I come across to you as we work together? What could I start or stop doing to more effectively serve you?" You'd like to obtain their feedback so you could consistently support and encourage them. But when you ask for their thoughts, what you receive in response is "Nothing."

Your team members have thoughts about your behaviors, but maybe they think there will be a better time later to share their observations. Or maybe they imagine it will be hard to describe your impact in words that will be meaningful to you.

Maybe they'd like to offer some observations, but they're not sure what repercussions their comments might generate (remember, you are their "boss"). Perhaps they are surprised that their thoughts are as passionate (or negative or even affirming) as they are. Maybe they think you can't change or aren't truly interested in hearing their perspectives. Perhaps they have doubts that their observations are legitimate. They might wonder, "What if I'm the only one who feels this way?"

These comments could apply to anyone, of course. But leaders like you have more trouble than anyone else when it comes to receiving candid feedback. And yet, the more you move up the hierarchy, the more critically you need that kind of information.

Some individuals may fear your wrath, not wanting to be a bearer of bad news. Some prefer to lay low and be good citizens, just doing their job well (and they consider that giving you feedback is not part of their job). Some may not want to compliment you, fearing others might criticize their motives.

Isn't it ironic that in a society where freedom of speech is so highly valued, we don't share specific information that could help our leaders improve their effectiveness? Oh, sure, teammates talk openly in private, However, too often, no one shares the information with you, the one person who could use it productively.

So, what do you do if you want to find out what they know? You must listen intently when team members are speaking (rather than sharing your thoughts, even when your intentions are good). You must ask for feedback repeatedly, in one-to-ones, and in small groups that you assemble frequently (perhaps once a month?) for that explicit purpose.

An unwritten agreement in our society is that "you don't give feedback to the boss." To overcome this, you must create a safe environment. Even if you ask, people won't provide their perspectives if your response is aggressive toward them or even an apparent rejection of their thoughts and requests.

Further, your colleagues must see you doing something with the information. If you show no tangible response to the information, folks will stop sharing. You're much better off if you consider the information, report back to your team members what you are doing and why, and then ask again later for additional comments. You gain credibility and commitment to your success if you share your progress (and appreciation for their insights) with the team members who have helped you.

Individuals are willing to help you be more effective. However, the initiative to create a healthy environment for obtaining that information is yours! Don't settle for silence any longer. Go ask! And ask again! But be gentle in doing so! The feedback providers, not you, determine if the environment is safe for sharing honestly.

Intentionally listening well when your team members are talking to each other can also be very beneficial. Listen for what you can discern about your outlook and behaviors from what they say.

Your overt efforts to learn what you need to know might unexpectedly result in your organization manifesting a more feedback-oriented culture!

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*Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach helping organizations in Atlanta build future leaders, improve processes, and establish healthy cultures. His written materials, almost 500 articles, are available on his website, [buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives](http://buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives). Dennis welcomes your feedback and ideas for possible future articles at [dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com](mailto:dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com), or call Dennis at 770-286-2250.*