

Welcome to the May 2004 issue of **Management Shorts**  
Written by Andrea Corney ([ACorney@acorn-od.com](mailto:ACorney@acorn-od.com))  
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### **I. INTRO: The Bedrock Skill**

Feedback (telling people how they are doing) is what I call a “bedrock” skill – it is the foundation for most of what you do as a leader or manager. Learning to give feedback at work is like learning to read in school – if you can’t read, you can’t study literature, history, philosophy, or anything else. Even conducting a Google search or creating a VC presentation requires basic literacy!

When it comes to exercising leadership and managing people, feedback is as basic as your ABC’s. It is such a core skill that many of my other newsletters refer to feedback as part of the solution to many different management challenges (as in last month’s newsletter on the hidden dynamics of hierarchy at <http://lists.topica.com/lists/shorts/read/message.html?mid=1716526747&sort=d&start=0>).

This newsletter is the first in a multi-part series on feedback. This month we start with the basics.

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### **II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Feedback Basics**

Imagine your boss or co-worker approaches you and says, “I’ve got some feedback for you.”

Go ahead, really picture it.

Notice how your body sags or your stomach gets tight? That’s a typical response to the idea of feedback. If you now imagine giving feedback to a direct report who is not performing well, you probably imagine a similar feeling of anxiety. Not surprisingly, most of us avoid giving or asking for feedback except when we have

absolutely no choice (such as the annual performance review) and then we rush through it as quickly as possible – guaranteeing that it will be unproductive and thus reinforcing the belief that feedback is useless.

Why are we so uncomfortable giving feedback? Typical concerns are:

- \* I won't say it right.
- \* The other person will get defensive or angry
- \* The other person will think less of me
- \* The other person will be hurt
- \* The relationship will be damaged
- \* The situation will get worse
- \* Once I say something negative, I can't ever take it back

These are legitimate concerns. When done poorly, feedback can lead to any of these outcomes. Why does this happen? Most of what passes for feedback in corporate America is really personality labeling or unfounded attributions of the other's intent. At its worst it is a very polite version of the name-calling you see on any grade school playground – and just as effective:

- \* "You are not a team player." ["Yes, I am"]
- \* "You are power-hungry." ["No, I'm not."]
- \* "You don't listen." ["Yes, I do"]
- \* "You are selfish." ["No, I'm not"]
- \* "You are not strategic." ["Am too!"]
- \* "You are defensive – and the fact that you disagree with this is proof that you are defensive!" ["@#\*%!"]
- \* "You are a stupid-head" ["Well, you're a stupider-head!"]

Oops, had a schoolyard flashback there!

Notice that every sentence starts with "you". We've all heard the advice to use "I" statements. This is a good start, but by itself can lead to things like "I feel you're defensive" or "I feel you are a stupid-head", which really aren't much of an improvement.

So, let's look at what is behind all this "I" statement stuff. When you and I interact we often make the mistake of thinking there is one reality rather than multiple realities:

- (1) There is **your reality** – what you are thinking and feeling and your intentions when you interact with me. All of this going on in your head leads to,
- (2) **Your behavior**, which is everything that could be caught on a video tape – what you say or do, tone of voice, facial expression and body language. Even silence is behavior.
- (3) The final reality is **my reaction** to your behavior. This includes my thoughts and feelings as well as opinions I start to form about the kind of person you are.

Your thoughts, feelings and intentions are your area of expertise. This is what you know best and I know least. Both of us, however, can see your behavior. I am the expert in my reactions to your behavior. This is what I know best and you know least. If we think of this as a tennis court, we each have our “side of the net” where we are the experts. When we “jump over the net”, we are in our area of ignorance, and yet most of us learn to equate feedback with talking about the other’s thoughts, feelings, intentions and, ultimately, their personality.

So by jumping over the net we are ignoring our area of expertise and instead talking about the area about which we are most ignorant. [Now that really is the sign of a stupid-head.]

What would it look like to stay on my side of the net?

- \* “I am very frustrated by how the meeting is going”
- \* “I am losing confidence that you will deliver what I need from you on time”
- \* “When you don’t acknowledge my ideas I feel angry and find that I stop listening to you”
- \* “I think a different approach will be more helpful”
- \* “I want you to let me finish my thought before sharing what you think”

Staying on my side of the net does not mean sugar-coating or the famous “sandwich” method of putting a criticism between two pieces of praise. Staying on my side of the net can at times be quite tough. But whether the feedback is about something that is going well or something that could be improved, it is always **most accurate** when I pair a **specific description** of the behavior with the **impact of that behavior on me**.

- \* “You often interrupt me and it leaves me wondering whether you are interested in what I have to say. Because of that concern I find myself looking for ways to work around you rather than with you. I don’t think that serves either one of us very well.”

For those of you who like a formula or recipe, this boils down to:

- \* “When you do X (behavior), I think or feel Y (my reaction).”

The formula is even more effective when you take it a step further and move into problem solving:

- \* “It would be helpful to me if you could do Z instead? Would that work for you? What do you need?”

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### **III. FOR THOSE WHO WANT MORE: PDF & Source Material**

For a visual depiction of the “net” concept, you can download a PDF at:

<http://www.acorn-od.com/IntroToFeedback.pdf>

I first learned my ABC's of feedback in a Stanford Business School course called "Interpersonal Dynamics", created by Professor David Bradford. If you like to go straight to the horse's mouth, I highly recommend his most recent book (with co-author Allan Cohen)

[Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership.](#)

I think of this as the "tough love" book of team building with its focus on getting real work done and confronting the most difficult issues head on. Appendix A "Power Talk" is the source material for this article. You can find the book on Amazon at:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471121223/acornconsulti-20>

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#### **IV. FINAL THOUGHTS: Untapped Data**

This newsletter has been about giving feedback, but the biggest value to you as a manager is creating conditions in which your peers and direct reports feel free to give you feedback. Think about it this way: The people you work with are the experts on how your behavior helps or hinders them and, therefore, on how you can be more effective at working with them. Wouldn't it be helpful to have even a little bit of that data?

Not sure how to get it? Give me a call.

Next month in Management Shorts I'll continue the discussion of feedback with some practical examples of how you can use feedback to improve business outcomes.

TECHNICAL NOTE: This month I am testing out a new e-mail newsletter system called email brain. Let me know if you have any problems with the new system.

Until next month . . .

Warm regards,  
Andrea

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About Management Shorts

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**Management Shorts** is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

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