

Welcome to the September 2004 issue of Management Shorts
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I. INTRO: "I Must Be Perfect"

You are an experienced manager and you've learned the hard way that people often don't tell you what they are thinking, particularly about things you may be doing that make it harder for them to do their job. You believe you are open to constructive criticism and have tried several times to ask your direct reports for feedback, but they always say everything is fine or mumble about something inconsequential.

Maybe you're such a great manager that there really is no feedback for you!

And maybe we will find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

In the meantime, let's assume that the people who work for you (and with you) have valuable information for you about how you could be more effective in your job. How do you get them to tell you?

This issue of **Management Shorts** gives you practical things you can do to encourage others to give you useful feedback.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Practical Ways to Get Useful Feedback

Lets start with being specific about what we are looking for. If you are a manager, the only way you get things done is through other people. You are effective only to the extent that you know how to communicate, inspire, support, and generally play nice with others. You can read about how to do that (and you religiously study every issue of **Management Shorts** that hits your e-mail box!), but the most accurate and valuable information you can get is feedback from others on how your behavior impacts them. Do you help them do their jobs or do you get in the way? Does your behavior draw people towards you or push them away? Do you communicate in ways that make it easy to talk to you or make it a chore? **Getting feedback on these things is just like having a system on a factory floor for data collection and failure analysis.**

“Okay, okay! I get the point”, you say, “ but I’ve asked and asked and don’t get anything. What else can I do?”

Plenty. Below are a number of simple tactics you can start using today. Try one, try several. (No this is not the same as “vote early, vote often”.) The more you try, the better your results will be.

Why People Hold Back

First we need to understand why people hold back. Most people are reluctant to give honest feedback to their boss (and to co-workers) for very good reasons. They’ve either had it backfire on them or seen it backfire on someone else. Even when it doesn’t hurt them, feedback hardly ever seems to lead to any positive change, so why take a big risk for a low margin return? They are acting rationally. **You need to show by your actions that it will serve them well to give you feedback.** This will take time. Have patience.

The second reason most people hold back is that they aren’t confident in their feedback skills. They worry they will do it poorly and offend the other. They haven’t had the benefit of the Management Shorts article on **Feedback Basics!** (Its available at www.acorn-od.com/shorts/archive/shorts-17.html)

So you have two big concerns to overcome. The tactics below are design to address those concerns – over time (remember the patience part).

Tactics for Encouraging Useful Feedback

1. Keep Asking

You are highly unlikely to get anything useful the first time you ask. Your directs and peers don't trust that you mean it. If you ask once or twice and then give up, they will conclude it was, as they suspected, pro forma. Managers signal what matters by focusing their attention on something again and again.

2. Do Regular "After Action Reviews"

Signal that there is always room for improvement by taking time to ask "what worked and what can we do better next time?" This can be as simple as leaving a customer meeting and turning to the direct report who sat in on the meeting and saying: "I'd love your thoughts on how that went. Any suggestions for what I could do better next time?"

Making this a regular practice makes it less of a big deal. It also communicates that you don't expect yourself or anyone else to be perfect and that looking at what could have gone better is not a threat. I've been in companies where this kind of openness is seen as a sign of competence and self-confidence.

3. Take a Learning Stance

This is a continuation of #2 above. The successful people I've worked with over the years have a common trait; they are always looking for ways to improve their performance. They don't let their need to appear competent get in the way of being open to learning something new. This includes learning how your behavior impacts others.

4. Ask for Feedback on Specific Things

If someone is uncertain how open you are to feedback, the general request for feedback can feel like a trap. "What kinds of things can

I say without getting into trouble? Is the boss asking for small things like ‘You tend to interrupt’ or big things like ‘I don’t think you have a strategic bone in your body?’” The result is you get nothing or milquetoast things like, “you could say ‘hi’ more often when you pass me in the hall”.

Asking for specific things helps them know what kinds of responses are safe and also sends a signal about how serious you are about this whole feedback thing.

What should you ask about? Anything that is on your mind about how you work with others is fair game. A few examples:

- “Have I been clear enough about what success looks like on this project?”
- “When I ask how things are going, I’m looking to find out where my help is needed, but I wonder if it comes across to you as critical?”

5. Share Areas You Are Working On

This is a variation on #4.

- “I’ve gotten feedback in the past that I tend to interrupt a lot. I’ve been working on this, but realize that I’m not always aware that I’m doing it. Could you let me know when I do it with you?”
- “I’ve been working on being more open to others’ ideas. In our discussion today did you feel that your idea was heard and really considered or did you feel passed over?”

This approach serves the same goals as #4 – it makes it safer for them to respond and it signals that you are serious about feedback. In addition, this variation also signals that you know you are not perfect. If you are comfortable being a “work in progress”, they will be more open about giving feedback, as well as more receptive to receiving feedback.

6. Take Responsibility For Your Part of the Problem

Years ago I had a roommate with whom I had only a so-so relationship. I knew she was a little intimidated by me and I didn’t want to make things worse. However, I also was really bothered by

some things she did and wasn't willing to live with them. One day I said the following:

- “It seems that I’m usually the one that empties the dishwasher and that bothers me. I know I can sometimes be a little fussy about the kitchen and I wonder if that has made you nervous about putting things away.”

It turns out I was right on target. She was worried I’d be annoyed if she put things in the wrong place. If I had started out with an accusation that she didn’t pull her weight, I’m sure we would have ended up in an ugly fight. **But because I opened the conversation with the possibility that I could be part of the problem, she felt much less defensive** and we were able to workout an agreement that worked for both of us.

By the way, my hunch didn’t have to be right to be effective. All I’m really trying to do is open a dialogue about why something isn’t working out. Even if I’m wrong about how my behavior impacts her, I’ve signaled an openness to hearing about my part in a problem.

7. Give Regular Feedback

One of the best ways to get regular feedback is to give regular feedback. When feedback is a once a year thing tied to the performance review it becomes big and threatening. When it becomes part of everyday interaction, you get several benefits:

- The feedback can be about being more effective, rather than being a weapon in the compensation negotiation.
- Feedback in a timely way gives the other person a chance to correct a problem – the goal is to help them succeed in the future rather than tell them how they’ve failed in the past.
- The feedback comes out in bite-sized pieces that can be digested, instead of in one great pile that is overwhelming and certain to lead to defensiveness.
- The informal nature of everyday interaction, as opposed to the annual review, makes it easier to have a dialogue about what each of you might do differently.

All of the above is a way to role model how they can be effective in giving you feedback.

8. Act on Feedback You Receive

I've saved the best for last. The first time someone gives you feedback, it is a test. A test to see how you will take it, a test to see if you will retaliate, and a test to see if you will do anything about it. If you don't do anything about it, then the risk for the person giving feedback is just not worth it.

Here is a true story. I was talking to "Krishna" a mid-level manager who worked at a company that was very proactive about feedback. Krishna was initially skeptical about his boss's requests for feedback and was careful about what he said. He took what felt like a risk and told his boss it bothered him when his boss joined meetings that Krishna was leading and started to take over the meeting. His boss was very open and thanked him for the feedback, but Krishna didn't really expect that anything would change. So he was very surprised when he started to notice over the next few weeks that his boss was much quieter in meetings that he was leading. Krishna said to me, "That is when I really started to believe that he meant what he said when he asked for feedback."

Actions speak much louder than words.

III. FINAL THOUGHTS: Patience & Persistence

Giving feedback to one's boss (or a co-worker) is a scary proposition. Our experience tells us it is high risk and low reward. If you really want others to give you useful feedback, you need to send multiple positive signals to convince them that this situation is different.

As always, I welcome your feedback on this newsletter. ;-)

Warm regards,

Andrea

About Management Shorts

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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