

GIVING FEEDBACK

How Leaders Can Ask for the Feedback No One Wants to Give Them

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Tad knew he was losing his hearing. What he didn't know was that everyone around him knew as well.

Tad (not his real name) was a senior executive in a multinational company. Much of his work was done in lengthy meetings with dozens of participants. His hearing loss was making it difficult for him to keep track of what was happening in meetings – but his vanity kept him from getting a hearing aid. So instead, when he missed important points, he would try to decipher what was happening from slides or fill in the blanks from the fragments of conversation he could catch. Others in the meetings were, by turns, embarrassed for and frustrated with him. People began trying to hold meetings without him in order to improve efficiency. They would feign strong emotion when making a point so that they had an excuse to raise their volume. But no one dared raise the issue.

It turns out, Tad is not alone. Most managers aren't aware of what their employees really think about them.

We and our colleagues at VitalSmarts recently conducted an online study to understand if employees feel comfortable and able to share critical feedback with their manager – especially when the feedback is about the manager's behavior. Eighty percent of the 1,335 respondents said their boss has a significant weakness that everyone knows and discusses covertly with each other, but not directly with their manager.

It doesn't have to be this way. If there's something about your boss that frustrates you (and everyone around you), here's how you can broach the subject in a thoughtful, productive way – and what managers can do to encourage their employees to open up.

How to Share Uncomfortable Feedback with Your Boss

Don't start with your complaint. Start with consequences. Help your boss understand not just what the problem is (they overschedule and then cancel meetings) but why they should care. If the boss has a *why* for listening to uncomfortable feedback, they're more likely to hear what you're saying. For example: “As you know, we've missed three customer deadlines in the past six months. The problem is fixable, but it involves working with you differently in the future. May I describe what I see going on?”

Offer workarounds rather than turnarounds. It would be nice if your boss committed to a major personality change as a result of your conversation, but don't bet on it. Even if they listen well and care about your concerns, their behavioral patterns may be so longstanding that they're unlikely to change anytime soon. That's why you should propose a workaround that mitigates the boss's weaknesses. For example: "I've examined the kinds of things we wait on you to decide. Of the eight kinds of decisions, four of them are ones you have followed the team's recommendations on 100% of the time. We can eliminate a chunk of our delays, and free up significant time on your calendar, if you delegate those to the team. We would notify you so that you could countermand the decision if you have concerns, but if we don't hear back in 24 hours we will move ahead. Would that work?"

Suspend judgment. Find a way to replace your judgments with empathy. If you're juiced up on resentment when you approach your boss, no amount of fakery will keep you from telegraphing your frustration. Conversations like these work only if the other person feels safe with you. And nothing destroys safety more reliably than a sense of derision. Examine your weaknesses. Examine your boss's strengths. Be honest with yourself about the ways in which you are part of the problem. For example, has procrastinating on having this conversation made matters worse? We've found the longer you wait, the more your resentment grows toward the other person. It's easy to let our own faintheartedness alchemize into disgust toward the boss.

How to Encourage Your Employees to Give You Feedback

The main thing leaders can do is make it safe to point out their weaknesses. This demands humility.

Sharing this article with your team is a great way to open this topic. Email it to your direct reports with the following statement: "This made me think about *me* and *us*. I want to know what everyone but me knows about what I can do better. In coming days, I want to create some opportunities for you to help me learn how I can support you better."

Then, use these three suggestions to follow through on that commitment:

Make it normal. Make employee-to-manager feedback a regular agenda item at team meetings. If you have made commitments to improve, take a moment to report on what you have done, and then ask team members to rate your effort on a scale of 1 to 10. They'll struggle the first few times you do it, but frequency will overcome timidity. Make it normal and it will feel less risky.

Adopt a coach. Ask a direct report who's usually candid to be your coach. Meet regularly to request feedback. Make the coaching relationship public to demonstrate your sincerity about improving.

Prime the pump. One of the most powerful ways to encourage feedback in a group or one-on-one setting is to “prime the pump.” Give examples of concerns your coach has raised to demonstrate that it is safe to share tough feedback with you. For example, you might say, “What can I do better? I’ve heard from Gail that I am often inaccessible. I spend a lot of time out of the office, which makes it difficult for you to involve me in critical issues. I am working on a plan to fix that. What else would you like me to do better on?” If you can quote feedback you’ve received in a way that shows you aren’t threatened by it, you generate evidence for your team that other issues might be safe as well.

The old cliché is wrong – ignorance is not bliss. The frustration and concern people keep from their bosses eat away at productivity, performance, and results. Our research shows that what people don’t talk out, they will act out in the form of resentment, turnover, apathy, or deference. The path to results is paved with candid and direct communication. Leaders aren’t exempt from bad behavior – and they shouldn’t be exempt from feedback either.



Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.