LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: FEEDBACK. GOOD OR BAD?

We know our readers are smart, independent thinkers and will evaluate any assertions made by an author, teacher or coach. Our caveat is that readers tend to take *Harvard Business Review* as "the truth" and we humbly request your consideration regarding a Marcus Buckingham/Ashley Goodall article, "*Why Feedback Fails*," published in the March-April 2019 issue and also published online as "The Feedback Fallacy." While offering some good suggestions, for example the table on page 100 (*all page numbers refer to the print edition of the March-April 2019 Harvard Business Review)*, several points in the article triggered us enough to write this article.

At Executive Coaching Network, Inc. (EXCN), we are realistically optimistic about feedback. EXCN's goal is to make feedback practical and valuable in any coaching situation: leader to direct report, peer to peer, direct report to boss, Board member to CEO, executive coach to leader, etc. We focus on how to deliver feedback effectively so that the recipient can hear it, work with it, and grow from it. For some real-life stories on the value of feedback see from EXCN: The Courage of Candor and Making a Difference.

The major concerns we address in this article relate to these four areas:

1. Feedback vs. Radical Transparency
2. Source of Truth
3. How We Learn
4. Excellence

1. **Feedback vs. Radical Transparency**: One concern is that the authors seem to equate radical transparency with feedback. We at EXCN view radical transparency as possibly too confrontational. For many who work in "radical transparency" environments, the radical transparency does not constitute constructive feedback for them. In order for a feedback recipient to grow, improve performance or strive for excellence s/he needs to be able to "hear" the feedback.

   The HBR article defines radical transparency as the belief that the way to improve performance is through "rigorous, frequent, candid, pervasive, and often critical, feedback" (p. 95). Radical transparency is primarily associated with Bridgewater Associates/Ray Dalio and the culture at Netflix. To understand its effects, see Bridgewater's Ray Dalio Spreads His Gospel of Radical Transparency and At Netflix Radical Transparency and Blunt Firings Unsettle the Ranks.

   The value of feedback is strongly affected by ***how*** it is delivered. The useful table on page 100 enumerates examples of how to and how not to communicate feedback. Here are some best practices from EXCN's Breakaway Performance series: Creating a Feedback Culture.

2. **Source of Truth:** The authors say, "The first problem with feedback is that humans are unreliable raters of other humans" (p. 95).

   Great leaders understand that humans who rate other humans will be influenced by their own biases. Great leaders also care deeply about how each person on their team is affected by anything they may

©2019 Executive Coaching Network, Inc.

say. A human's truth is *her/his own reality*. A good leader, direct report, or friend pays attention to *that reality.* We are all rated through the colored lenses of our stakeholders.

There is great benefit in understanding how you are perceived—in fact, feedback is a gift to be eagerly received. Hiding from the truth is not a pathway to improving leadership or getting promoted.

EXCN emphasizes that 360 feedback conveys the *perceptions* of the leader's stakeholders (their reality!). These perceptions are never presented as objective truths.

The authors assert: "…you should be worried about just how fundamentally flawed [your data] really is" (p. 96). This is an overstatement. Numerical data are validated by commentary; ratings plus comments can help the feedback recipient, for example, understand her/his impact on others so that s/he can learn how to more positively affect others.

If feedback recipients are not pleased with their data, they have the opportunity to do something about it. Any human resource officer, boss, or coach can help the feedback recipient make sense of the information, find tools to validate the information if so desired, create a plan, and measure improvement. In the end, if the feedback recipient improves, the feedback has been valuable.

3. **How We Learn:** The authors assume (p. 97) that "fight or flight" inhibits learning. We are not convinced that this assumption is true in all cases. In fact, a moderate amount of anxiety can contribute to motivating change. It is the do or die effect – we have survived as a species because of, not in spite of, threats to our survival.

   Best practices suggest building on strengths is a crucial part of long-term success. Further, we have learned that:

   - The best leaders are committed to self-improvement.
   - The best employees seek, expect, and are motivated by clear information about their performance.
   - Most are inspired by understanding why they couldn't get promoted or couldn't influence team members to see their point of view.

   Sometimes we need a wake-up call that tells us that our performance is ineffective, or less effective than we would want, so that we can avoid repeating it.

4. **Excellence:** The authors posit that excellence is idiosyncratic, unique to each person, and cannot be learned by studying failure. We believe that we can learn from studying both failures and successes.

   The authors describe their recommendation to build excellence on page 101, taking a page out of radical transparency: "If you see somebody doing something that really works, stopping her and dissecting it isn't only a high-priority interrupt, it is your *highest*-priority interrupt." Yes, build on strengths. However, there can be disturbing "unintended consequences" of stopping people in meetings and saying, "good job," or "here is what is working right now" and never giving any constructive criticism.

Finally, regarding excellence—in most organizations EXCN works with, excellence is defined by such measures as safety records, financial targets, and alignment with values. Yes, excellence is cultivated and taking positive action is a method of achieving excellence, yet without its equal counterpart – consequences for lack of excellence – high performers are likely to leave your organization.

Bottom line: feedback is an essential tool for effective and healthy organizations. The way feedback is defined, utilized, delivered, understood, and acted on will determine how successful it is.

How have you benefited from feedback received? What changes have direct reports or peers made after having received feedback?