

# STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

March 2004

## Personnel Pointers

### Conquering Communication Conundrums: Giving Constructive Feedback by Melinda Caldwell

Growing up, you probably had more than one adult tell you, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." While this remains to be one of the basic lessons of life, the reality of business is that, sometimes, achieving success requires that you say difficult things. Fostering improvement and outlining standards of quality almost always involve providing feedback that can be hard for people to hear.

Everyone in your company or on your team would likely agree that, in theory, the concept of giving and receiving feedback is essential for growth. People have a desire to know if they are doing a good job as well as if they can improve and excel in their work and in their relationships with others. The difficulty, however, lies in putting this concept into practice. This is where facts and logic many times collide with human emotion, differing personalities and conflicting learning styles, resulting in interpersonal stress and professional frustration. For example, when feedback consistently focuses on the negative aspects of every situation, those receiving the feedback become defensive toward and distrustful of the individual providing the feedback. While being brutally straightforward about a problem can have its merits, most of the time it only succeeds in building barriers.

On the other hand, when feedback focuses on the most positive aspects of every situation and repeatedly avoids all mention of problems or failures, a culture of insincerity can emerge. People either begin to wonder if the positive feedback is really authentic or they perceive that criticism of any kind is taboo. This, too, is not an environment in which strong, trusting relationships can develop.

Well, by now you've probably guessed it: The key to providing constructive feedback that enhances your team's performance lies in the delivery. The goal is to balance both the content and the relationship involved in the feedback. Psychology professor David Perkins and his colleague Amy Sullivan developed the Feedback Ladder during the course of their work at Project Zero, an educational research group at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. This model was developed as a means for providing meaningful feedback in a variety of settings:

- Step 1: Clarify anything that might be confusing or unclear.
- Step 2: Value what is strong or effective in the work.
- Step 3: Express concerns and/or problems.
- Step 4: Offer suggestions for improvement.

While all four steps involve the balance between content and relationship that we discussed earlier, Steps 1 and 2 begin with a strong focus on the relationship side of that balancing act. These steps affirm the value of the individual and his or her ideas and/or contributions to the team. Step 1 involves a positive introduction to the topic at hand. Approach the person and verify that you understand the issues. Make sure that you are both on the same page from the start of the conversation. Avoid questions that imply criticism. Step 2 provides a more focused affirmation of the person in the context of the topic being discussed. Give specific examples of the positive attributes of the person's work or idea. Be sincere. This may require that you spend a bit more time preparing for the conversation, but the extra time will only result in a more productive interaction.

Steps 3 and 4 then turn the focus of the conversation to the content side of the balancing act. Step 3 requires that you express your concerns and/or problems to the individual in a clear and constructive way. Avoid using absolute or accusing terms. This is the point in the conversation that is most susceptible to defensiveness and emotional reactions. Remember that this is a natural response—people tend to be protective of their work and ideas. Make it clear that you are bringing this to the person's attention not to be unduly critical or negative, but to achieve a more positive outcome for all involved. Finally, Step 4 involves a clear communication of your concrete suggestions for improvement or change. Before ending the conversation, work together to develop a plan for implementing these suggestions.

While using the Feedback Ladder to provide constructive criticism might take more time and preparation initially, after some practice it becomes less time-consuming and mentally rigorous. Besides, it will be worth the improvement in morale and effective communication.

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