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Becoming an Employer of Choice

OPEN COMMUNICATION THROUGH FEEDBACK

by

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Stress and Control

Have you ever, at any point in your life wanted to give advice, a suggestion, an idea to a person in charge - perhaps your 'manager' (whoever that was) and couldn't? Even when your idea would have saved money, time, problems, accidents... but this person wouldn't listen or was not reachable?

Most people have had that experience. How did you feel as a result? Most of us have felt frustration in these situations. What did you do as a result? Take time off, get sick, go slow, find another job? Most of us have done some of that.

Staff may not be equipped to know how they should be managed, but they are very well equipped to know how they *feel*! The employer of choice for many people is the organisation that manages the feelings of its staff - not in a manipulative way with smokescreens and cardboard bonuses, but in a positive, genuine and caring sense. There are many factors causing stress on the job, but the research shows that the highest level of stress is experienced by those who have no control over their work situation. To quote Dr Nikki Ellis, Chair of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians: "... there's a relationship between control and workload... The worst case scenario is when you have high workload and a very low level of control" ¹.

One-way "communication"

In attempting to get the best performance from staff, we have relied too much on "communication" *from* the manager. But communication is a two-way street, by definition. A one-way system is simply "messaging" (I sit here and wait for messages, I do what they tell me. And sometimes I smirk when they get it wrong). Why have the brilliance of the human brain working for you and keep it running on low?

Open communication, on the other hand, leads to trust and shared control and creates synergy between all parties - staff, peers, customers, suppliers, the manager and *their* manager. But how are we to get past barriers and fears to create such an environment? It isn't done by just telling managers to talk to their people, or telling staff that the company has an open door policy - it's lack of trust that stops them.

360 appraisal

One acknowledged approach is to gather anonymous assessments from all parties as components of the performance management system. Known as 360 feedback, this approach has swept through organisations, changing the focus from downward to all around. While some managers have been glad to have the appreciation of their staff counted in the balance, others have had the opposite experience. The resulting issues have not always been well resolved.

Let's consider this process in three stages. Firstly, is most benefit gained by presenting the manager with information from all parties at once - the fullest kind of 360 assessment? Our experience is that this complicates the situation, makes it hard for the manager to know where to start and increases stress. They may react by clinging to the group that likes them, and use that to justify the dislikes of the others.

Notwithstanding, we do find a use for 360 in MBA and learning programs where managers are actively helped to focus on how they can develop. It can also be an effective tool in an organisation once a climate of open communication has matured. Also, 360 can serve as a benchmark in its own right.

Where to start?

Secondly, in planning a feedback program, is there is a best point to begin? Generally, if you begin with peers, you find a complex situation. Peers can be competitive, uninformed or uninterested, or share beliefs that amount to the "management view". While lateral feedback is important and has its impact on the climate of communication, it doesn't make a good starting point for real change. Customers' and suppliers' feedback are critical, and many organisations begin their change process with customers. However, even when equipped with such feedback, managers still have to communicate with their teams to improve results. [Our own approach with customers uses a different process to gather this information, and leads to increased communication and control for staff, but is beyond the scope of this paper].

If you begin with the *team*, customers will quickly come into the picture, and peers, too, if they are having an impact on the job. The problems experienced by individuals, as well as the unspoken task problems together with a lot of good ideas will emerge. When these are taken on board and considered, people immediately feel their importance to the team - and they think twice about missing a day or moving to another job.

Pressuring change

The third question about 360 is: if our aim is to create a climate of openness, what kind of feedback will be most effective? How helpful is it to assess the manager's performance and, by showing up his or her weaknesses, pressure them to change? This is what most traditional appraisal systems have done, and they tend to be disliked by both the appraiser and those being appraised. Frequently they soon fall into disuse. Rather than openness, appraisal systems can often create defensiveness and lowered morale ².

How have you personally reacted to pressure of this kind? Many managers react with:

- 1) Rejection - "the feedback is wrong, unfair"; or
- 2) "It's true but that's what makes me a tough (= good) manager"; or
- 3) They misunderstand it and take actions that they think will help but do not address the real issues (after all, managers can only interpret the feedback they are given); or

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- 4) They get depressed, hurt, afraid, angry, they leave...; or
 - 5) "It doesn't give a fair coverage of *all* the issues - doesn't look at things I do well..."; or
 - 6) "They're not clearly defined competencies that you can act on, they're too general..."; and so on.

Of course recrimination and revenge are not uncommon results.

The fact is that appraisal from below is not any easier to take than from above. To this we should add that managing performance is an on-going process (not just at appraisal times)² and that this must involve a climate of open communication.

Just giving feedback

If our aim is to promote open communication, we should manage performance in a way that gets all staff to operate from feedback, not judgement, and explain their needs rather than criticise what anyone is doing³. The way management relates to each manager then becomes *the model by which managers relate to staff*. With this in mind, we require a feedback system that is:

1. based on simple clear behaviours that the manager can modify
2. doesn't make judgements about the manager in terms of "good" or "bad"
3. instead provides high quality useable information on needs
4. keeps the results confidential to the manager, not on his or her record or ultimately affecting remuneration (specific performance indicators can be mutually agreed for this purpose as the open environment develops)

And in addition:

5. involves the team in taking more responsibility and control to resolve issues
6. promotes the ongoing management of performance in an environment of open communication.

What a manager must get from the feedback process is a needs analysis that looks at their whole way of working with their team. This can be achieved by a methodology⁴ that:

- covers **all the issues** of both Leadership (the future) and Management (the present) for both people and task, and therefore is respected as fair to all. This makes leadership as important as management and creates a language and a broad ranging dialogue within the organisation⁵
- looks at simple and clearly defined **best practices** in each area and that must, as a result, be inclusive of particular competencies selected as important to the organisation - as well as other issues that may be critical to an individual team (and yet may not included in the selected competencies)
- does *not* appraise, but merely asks about **requirements** for each item "To do your job better, do you require *more*, *less* or *the same*?" This amounts to an automatic gap analysis - the areas of concern stand out
- **goes back to the people** who gave the feedback, asks them what they really meant, and leads them through a **facilitated process** of discovery to reach the central or underlying causes that must be resolved
- provides the team with a **role model** for openness

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- **involves them** in coming up with solutions to the problems, and gets their buy-in for the actions required by sharing control with them
 - Leads to a culture of on-going performance management
 - gets **feedback from peers**, cross-functional and self-managing teams at the right moment
 - provides **learning opportunities** for the requirements identified for managers and teams
 - provides a **benchmark** by which groups of managers can measure their improvement.

Ensuring change happens

Such a system takes a lot of the sting out of 360 feedback. When we remove the threat of appraisal from the manager, we have to be sure that we have some positive ways to achieve our aim. In our own system, we require that the manager go back to the team, present the issues that s/he believes to be of concern, and *leave the room*. With the manager absent, the team is facilitated in agreeing on both what they appreciate and what their *real* concerns are, and then presents them to the manager when he or she returns. The team members' anonymity (the guarantee of honesty) must be carefully guarded throughout.

With this approach, anonymity usually ceases to be a concern, and a process that begins cloaked in secrecy ends up open to all in the team. Since all the cards are on the table, it becomes obvious where learning and development have to take place. With the proper assistance given, the system becomes very supportive of the manager - and the team.

Of course, this approach requires skilled and sensitive facilitators so that any difficult area can be resolved positively. We use a methodology based on focus groups and Accelerated Learning.

Teams that are listened to in this way have greatly improved morale, with impact on absenteeism, stress and turnover. But there is more, when the team is involved in planning improvements, there is an increase in self-esteem. People contribute more, quality and productivity go up, and more innovative ideas are generated. Self-management increases, the job becomes really worthwhile and staff are keen to give that extra bit⁶. Even in difficult situations, they move from being conscripts to volunteers and, perhaps on to becoming professionals.

Can an organisation seriously argue that it doesn't have time for this, that there is no place for on-the-job learning and improvement? Such an organisation is unlikely to be an employer of choice, nor will it have the rapid response capability to fare well in a changing world.

Action planning

Critical to the process are clear and detailed action plans to put in place all the ideas and changes generated by the team (and learned by the organisation as team after team participates). Plans must be monitored to completion: at *this* point we can start to talk about appraisal. Confidentiality ends when it comes time to monitor completion of actions with the team. A manager who signs off on action plans and then doesn't achieve them certainly has some explaining to do.

Finally, the process works equally well with cross-functional and self-managed teams without directly involved managers.

The Upward Feedback® approach

Peter Farey researched these requirements and began his Upward Feedback® system as far back as 1974. Farey was a Senior HR Development Manager with British Airways during its transition from "Bloody Awful" (BA) to "World's Favourite Airline". Since 1995, Leaderskill Group has worked with him to introduce Upward Feedback® to Australia and New Zealand, and to extend the system which now comprises:

- Primary Upward Feedback®
- Peer Feedback
- Team and Self-Management Feedback
- 360° Leader/Manager Feedback for MBA and learning programs.

These are available by *direct processing* on the Internet at www.upwardfeedback.com.au (as far as we know at this time, the first site of its kind anywhere), and paper-based, email or intranet. Many articles are also available on this site.

In this country, in the public sector Upward Feedback® has reached all levels of government, including the Senior Executive Service of the Australian Public Service where it has been carefully evaluated and very well received. In the private sector, clients include finance, insurance, pharmaceuticals, air transport, manufacturing, building construction and information technology.

¹ Ellis, N. Mastering the Control Factor, Part Four. Radio National Health Report transcript, November 1998.

² Cascio, WF. Managing for Maximum Performance. *AHRI: HR Monthly Article of the Month*. October 1997.

³ Kaufman, R., Thiagarajan, S., & MacGillis, P., Eds. (1997). The Guidebook for Performance Improvement: Working with Individuals and Organisations. 19. Performance Management. Forbes, R & A Bell. San Francisco, Pfeiffer & Co/Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Forbes, R. (1996). Upward Feedback, a New Power for the Learning Organisation. *AHRI: HR Monthly Article of the Month, November 1996*.

⁵ Farey, P. (1993). Mapping the Leader/Manager. *Management Education and Development, Vol 24, Part 2*. Lancaster University, UK.

⁶ Craig, G. (1998) Act on the Feedback, then Measure the Impact. *Human Resources, June 1998*. Institute of Personnel Management, NZ.