

Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success

Are you neglecting the three vital skills that could cost your organization's future?

By Barry Banther

There are five simple words that can spell doom for a leader – “*If I had only known!*” These are the words you utter right after a major donor leaves you for a different organization, a valuable board member resigns unexpectedly, or an error occurs that will cost you thousands out of your own pocket. That’s why the best leaders thrive on employee, donor, and board feedback.

So, why don’t more of us go out of our way to encourage candid feedback? Our first response to this question is typically focused on our team. We aren’t convinced that they really get the big picture, we don’t want to distract them from their current work, or we simply don’t value their opinion. But the best advisors will tell you the problem isn’t the leader’s associates but, rather, the leader’s perspective.

If leaders aren’t careful, they can begin to believe that they alone know what’s best. No one could possibly make better decisions than they do, and no one has the organization’s best interests at heart like they do. This kind of thinking leads to mediocrity at best and failure at worst.

Just think about examples where feedback wasn’t encouraged and the results were troublesome: the Toyota accelerator problem or the rollout of the national healthcare website, for example. In each situation someone possessed important information but wasn’t encouraged to share it.

Among successful professionals there’s one constant truth: Trust between leaders and their associates is built on freedom to speak and to be heard. An organizational culture in which listening to employees isn’t valued impacts an organization at every level.

But it takes more than listening to get the kind of feedback a leader needs. Many surveys will tell you that people don’t believe their leader is genuinely listening most of the time.

One employee survey asked, “If your supervisor could improve in one area that would make a difference in your work performance, what should it be?” Among the numerous cynical answers (some too rude to print) a common one stood out: “Value my opinion enough to look at me and listen when I’m telling you something. I could save you from a lot of trouble.” When the person who leads us doesn’t listen to us, we can sense it – and we don’t like it.

So, how can you turn that attitude around? How can you create an environment where you’re getting consistent feedback? Three steps are essential. Without them you’ll always be working with half truths and misinformation. With them, you’ll become proactive, anticipating both challenges and opportunities before everyone else. Your reputation as a leader who develops followers will soar.

1. Stop and listen. When an associate is talking with you, don’t be multitasking. Stop whatever you’re doing and listen.

A director in a major hospital was accused of frequently checking his e-mail and text messages while meeting with his team. He agreed that for one week he would keep the phone in his pocket or on the desk, look right at whoever was speaking, and just listen.

The results within a week were staggering. Countless team members commented on how much they appreciated his new behavior. One associate who is usually reticent told him of an impending problem that would have been catastrophic for the hospital. Giving his undivided attention proved



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invaluable to the director. Not only did he learn things he wouldn't have known otherwise, but he developed a new level of trust with his colleagues.

2. Suspend judgment. Some leaders believe that if they don't act like they have the answer, their employees will lose respect for them. This thought process is backward: Pretending to have all the answers is the chief cause of not being respected.

If you're prone to snap judgments and haven't disciplined your mind to routinely suspend judgment, then you'll assess, decide, and respond without getting all the feedback. And you might be right 75% of the time, but the 25% of the time that you jumped to a conclusion could cost you your career and your organization's future. When you're getting feedback from a team member, learn to hold back on your first response and reach no conclusions until you've exhausted your conversation with this associate.

3. Search deeper. Rarely will an employee reveal everything to you about something right off the bat. As the leader, it's your job to bring out what the other person is thinking. Ask questions to search deeper for what the person is trying to convey – *How do you mean that? Can you give*

Listening for Clues

For more on gaining the feedback you need, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

What Does Feedback Have to Do with Governance? (Vol. 14, No. 6)


How to Build a Framework for Strategic Alliances: A Framework of Trust (Vol. 26, No. 6)

Five Secrets Every Leader Should Know (Vol. 23, No. 3)

Organizational Culture: It's in the Walk, Not Just the Talk (Vol. 29, No. 6)

Do You Have the Heart of a Servant Leader? (Vol. 28, No. 6)

me an example? Why is this important? How will this affect us? Which do you think will get you more feedback – words that end in a period or a question mark?

Chances are good that right now your associates have information you need to hear. Practice these three vital skills constantly, and the trust and feedback you gain could make all the difference. 

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