

This is the first of three articles about working with feedback. The second article is entitled **"If Feedback is so valuable why do we keep it to ourselves?"** The third article is entitled **"Who do you think you are?"**

The following story illustrates that getting useful feedback needs a little more thought than just asking, "How am I doing?"

It was the first working day of the new month and Matt Turner realised it was his monthly review meeting with his boss, Jenny Machin, that afternoon. Matt prided himself in being well prepared for these meetings so he checked his figures for the previous month, his year to date achievements, his plans for the coming month, his staff issues and achievements and his forecast for the remainder of the year.

The meeting took its usual course. Jenny welcomed Matt and asked about his family and his golf before moving on, as they had done in previous review meetings, to go through Matt's figures and plans. Matt was pleased with his ability to answer all Jenny's questions and to be able to demonstrate that he was on top of his job. It had been a good meeting but Matt was surprised, and a bit taken aback, when Jenny said "You doing well Matt. You're on top of your job, your staff's morale is high and your figures are looking good. Now tell me – how am I doing?" "I'm sorry" said Matt, somewhat startled, "what do you mean – how are you doing?" Jenny replied "Every month we go through your figures and plans and focus on your performance. We have never talked about how I am doing as your manager. My role is clearly to help you achieve and monitor how things are going but we never talk about my performance as your manager". Matt didn't know how to respond – he certainly hadn't planned for this. He began to mutter that Jenny was OK as his manager and he couldn't think of anything specific to say and when the meeting had finished both Jenny and Matt felt that part of the meeting hadn't gone too well. Jenny began to feel it wasn't such a great idea to ask, "How am I doing?" with Matt and decided to focus on performance and plans in future review meetings.

A fictional story but consider these points:

1. Most people go to work intending to do a good job. Jenny's role is to get the best out of people. She wanted to know if her style of management was working.

2. One of the many skills we need as managers is the ability to find the appropriate way of working with each of our team members. Different people respond well to different styles of being managed. E.g. the new graduate will require a very different approach to that of the experienced achiever who consistently delivers. If we want to be an effective manager our task is to find the best style for each person. For some of us this can be very difficult. Many of us have a preferred style of managing and are only able to use that style. We use our style as a “blunderbuss” – everyone gets the same no matter what their experience or maturity. It’s a matter of luck whether or not this will be effective. To ensure that our style is being effective we need feedback. Jenny was trying to get some feedback from Matt.

3. Matt wasn’t expecting Jenny’s question and, as a result, had no immediate answer. He anticipated Jenny’s questions about his performance and contribution and had prepared his responses. He had not prepared himself to give Jenny any feedback on her performance so, although he was probably quite willing to give Jenny feedback, he could only mumble a response. If we would like feedback from the people we work with we need to talk with them about our expectation. Just as we would be explicit with our colleagues about what we require from them in their role we need to set up an agreement with them that it’s OK to ask each other for feedback. Set up a contract. Then, when we ask for feedback our request doesn’t come out of the blue.

4. Unfortunately Jenny chose to ask the enormous question “How Am I doing?” No wonder Matt was somewhat startled. It’s a big question to answer. To help our colleagues give us feedback, try asking smaller questions like “When we attended your client meeting together how could I have been more supportive?” or “What could I have done to improve my presentation to the team?” or “On a scale of 1 to 10 how was my chairing of the meeting?” You can then discuss why you were given more than 1 (hopefully!) and/or less than 10. These are specific questions about our behaviour in specific situations. Our colleagues can now focus on a specific and hopefully, since they would have anticipated the question (remember point 3!), will be able to give us some valuable feedback. Try not to ask questions like “Was that OK?” which invites either a Yes or No answer.

5. Jenny lost a valuable opportunity to learn.

Some questions to think about:

Have your team members told you the impact your way of working is having on them?

How many times have you asked for feedback today? In the last week? In the last month?

Have you created a “continuous improvement” and “feedback” culture in your team? Is it routine for people to give each other feedback with a view to helping each other develop?

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