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## Taking the fear out of feedback

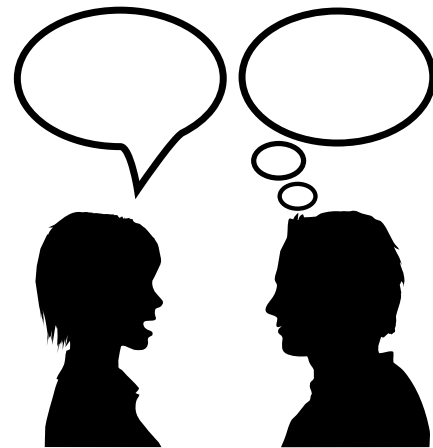
Why do high performing managers so often struggle with performance feedback? It seems like a paradox that successful people find it hard to give negative feedback or identify the developmental opportunities for those reporting to them. Why are these conversations so often unproductive, even to the extent of being resented by the employee and dreaded by managers?

We've been hearing a lot recently about moving from a rigid, process driven approach to performance management, to a more relational conversation between managers and employees. But what has received less attention is how to develop managers to make those conversations comfortable and productive.

Why do otherwise bright, capable and self-aware people find performance management conversations so difficult? There are a number of issues here:

- Managers may not feel they have the right to give people challenging or critical feedback, and they may become uncomfortable with responding if that feedback is challenged. They lack the interpersonal skills to deal with this potentially awkward situation and the conversation becomes more about managing their own personal state than helping the other person learn and develop.
- Managers whose position is based on their own skills and expertise may find it hard to articulate to others what is to them tacit knowledge: they can give challenging feedback but not the guidance on how to respond to it.
- Many managers are also reluctant to deal with the personal or emotional issues that may lie at the root of a performance problem. They will stick very tightly to a purely professional approach.
- Receiving feedback is also a skill and an important one for leaders to demonstrate if they are going to encourage people to give them useful feedback. But receiving feedback gets harder as people move up organisations.

Giving feedback to leaders can be extremely stressful for staff: unless the leader makes it clear they see all feedback as a positive thing, the staff member will have to steel themselves to point out anything they see as negative, even if it may be damaging the organisation.



At MDV Consulting we believe that the way to expand a leader's overall capacity is to develop their conceptual, personal and interpersonal capacities. People progress at different rates in these areas and failure to address all three can impede their growth as leaders.

A leader's stage of development directly affects their ability to give and receive feedback. In fact we can relate feedback issues closely to where each of the people in the conversation is in their development. When designing performance management processes, it is important to take account of this in order to have productive conversations.

Some managers at a later development stage are successful at handling both the conflict and the ambiguity that arises in giving and receiving feedback - they welcome the opportunity to see where the conversation takes them. They will have a perspective of their own abilities, which enables them to understand what others need to do to improve their skills. And they will also value receiving feedback as an opportunity to learn.

## Taking the fear out of feedback

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For these managers, the removal of structure leads to richer and more productive performance conversations. They have developed not only their personal and cognitive capabilities, but strong interpersonal capacities as well. But what may have been overlooked in the rush to reduce rigidity is how a less-structured approach and an absence of guidelines may leave managers with less developed interpersonal skills floundering.

We cannot simply address this by reintroducing structure. The inherent ambiguity and potential conflict in performance management conversations will always be there - avoiding it only restricts the opportunities for individuals to develop. The other party in the conversation may already be well aware of their own strengths and therefore want that much more wide-ranging conversation about how they can achieve their goals.

The need is therefore to redesign performance management processes so that everyone can have an appropriate and productive conversation which works to the leading edge of their development stage. That means making managers aware that their own approach is only one approach of many. That their own behavioural style may be affecting the conversation and may need to be adapted. They will need tools to help them manage different situations and deal flexibly with those situations rather than retreat into the certainty of their own position.

In her book, 'Simple Habits for Complex Times', Jennifer Garvey Berger suggests that three habits of mind are important in enhancing the development of a feedback mindset;

- Asking different questions (instead of having the answers)
- Taking multiple perspectives (even when we disagree), and
- Seeing systems, and recognising ever shifting boundaries and patterns.

When approaching a feedback conversation, it is important to look not just where the recipient is in their development but where they are headed. This means not just increasing expectations but expanding the scope of

the feedback so that the conversation is not sterile and repetitive.

Take Steve. Steve is used to contributing through and being evaluated on his expertise: he is very comfortable being told what he is doing right, what he has done wrong, and how he needs to improve. A more developmental approach would be to talk to Steve about how his expertise is received in the organisation. Could he use it in different ways to get different results?

Sally has become used to being evaluated by her results. Maybe it's time to look at why she focuses on those particular goals. What other organisational outcomes are affecting her in behaviour? What are her underlying assumptions and beliefs?

Jen is well-versed at taking multiple perspectives and questioning fundamental assumptions. She loves feedback and exploration. So now the conversation needs to move on again, to ask what the output of all this exploration will be: what happens next? What actions will come out of it?

Matching these interventions to the individual is vital: having the "Steve conversation" with Jen will only bore and frustrate. Asking Steve to question his underlying beliefs when he is just moving towards greater flexibility in how he deploys his expertise could be both uncomfortable and confusing.

Having the right conversation with the right person at the right time is not only more beneficial for that person but a lot easier for the person giving feedback. We cannot only make performance conversations more productive by tailoring it to the individual's stage of development, we can take a lot of the dread out of it.

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