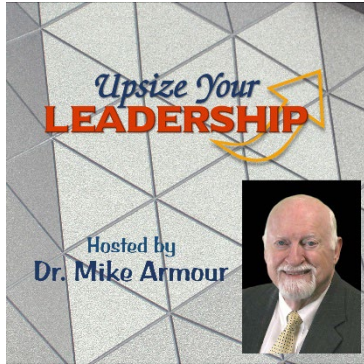


Feedback Done Right Part Two

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This is the second in a two-part series on the skill of providing proper feedback. Last week I outlined some step-by-step guidance in the feedback process. Today I want to offer some specific guidelines on how to word feedback. And today's guidance holds true, whether you are praising someone for stellar accomplishment or prodding the person to change a sub-par pattern of behavior.

I'm providing this two-part series on feedback because of how often my clients ask for training on this very topic. Everyone seems to recognize the importance of feedback done right. But as they look around, they often see it done poorly. The

methodology which I'm outlining today is a proven formula to follow if your goal is to Upsize Your Leadership.

If you have not heard the previous episode in this two-part series, let me encourage you to [check it out](#).

A critical takeaway from part one in this series is the importance of making feedback specific and concrete rather than vague or generalized. Telling someone that he or she is doing a good job carries little motivational clout. It does not clarify what the person has done specifically that has earned this praise. The person therefore does not know what to do more of in order to perform even better.

And specificity is even more vital when feedback aims at correcting behavior or weak performance. Feedback which says, "You need to pay more attention to details" may sound specific. But it does not clearly identify the critical details which have been neglected or the situation in which inattention to detail is a serious problem. As a result, the person who receives this feedback may not walk away from the conversation with a distinct picture of what he or she needs to do differently or the setting in which they should so.

When feedback is intended to bring about a change in behavior, we must be very careful to avoid needlessly stirring up defensiveness on the part of the person to whom the feedback is directed. Feedback should ideally be a learning experience, and defensiveness always takes us out of a learning mindset.

One of the surest ways to trigger defensiveness is to word feedback in such a way that it sounds judgmental. Defensiveness is also a hazard whenever feedback is not fact-based. People cannot easily discount statements of fact about their behavior, But they will not hesitate to dismiss someone's opinion of their behavior if they think that the opinion is ill-formed or invalid. This makes it essential for managers to offer feedback that is as factual as possible. Managers are never well-served by offering feedback that in reality is an opinion or subjective judgment masquerading as fact. People receiving this kind of feedback are likely to sniff out the masquerade and respond by giving the feedback little regard.

The guidance in today's podcast aims at structuring feedback so that it clearly communicates the essence of the feedback in very specific and factual terms. The model I'm sharing is not original with me. It's widely used in thousands of managerial settings. And the very fact that it is so widely utilized attests to how helpful managers and leaders have found it to be. The technique is called the SBI Model. SBI stands for Situation-Behavior-Impact. It's a simple method for keeping feedback fact-based and non-judgmental. Statements made using the SBI method follow this formula:

- a. This is the Situation [or Setting] which I'm addressing.
- b. I observed [or have been able to verify] this Behavior on your part in that Situation.
- c. This is the Impact which your Behavior had on me and/or others.

This formula is valid whether the Behavior was desirable or undesirable and whether the Impact was advantageous or adverse.

The Situation

You do not need to describe the Situation in any more detail than is required to establish the context. It should sum up where and when the event occurred which is the subject of the conversation.

For example:

- While I was taking our prospective new customer, Mr. Atherton, through our production facility yesterday . . .
- When you left the office Friday morning for a long weekend . . .
- When you turned in your expense report to accounting last week . . .

The Behavior

Once you've identified the Situation, next outline the specific behavior which you want to make the topic for discussion. This behavior needs to be either something you personally observed or have been able to verify or document. Usually the Behavior will be something which you saw or heard yourself. But occasionally your knowledge of the Situation and Behavior may be based on a documentary record which you've examined and authenticated. Building on our previous descriptions of the Situation, we might say something along these lines regarding the Behavior.

- While I was taking our prospective new customer, Mr. Atherton, through our production facility yesterday, you gave him a very thorough presentation about of our quality control process.

- When you left the office Friday morning for a long weekend, you provided the entire team a detailed status report on your key accounts.
- When you submitted your expense report to accounting last week, there were significant discrepancies between three of the receipts and the amounts which you entered on the report.

Notice that these statements are merely straightforward and factual. They are not based on hearsay or judgments which could be considered subjective. Nor is there any speculation about what might have led to the Behavior under discussion.

For instance, the third statement I just cited would violate the SBI model if it were worded, “When you submitted your expense report to accounting last week, you were sloppy in filling out the form. You apparently rushed through it without taking time to check your work carefully.” The truth is, the errors on the form may have resulted from something other than sloppiness or being rushed. The comments about sloppiness and being rushed are judgments or interpretations of the facts, not the statement of things observed or verified first hand.

The Impact

The statement of Impact in the SBI model answers the question, “So what?” How did the Behavior affect the person offering the feedback and others? The Impact statement should leave no doubt in a worker’s mind as to what resulted from his or her actions,

Thus, we could round out our previous statements in this manner.

- While I was taking our prospective new customer, Mr. Atherton, through our production facility yesterday, you gave him a very thorough presentation about of our quality control process. He commented several times afterward about how informative your presentation was, and as a result, I feel confident that we will soon see a contract from him.
- When you left the office Friday morning for a long weekend, you provided the entire team a detailed status report on your key accounts. That afternoon we were able to answer urgent questions from two different clients by using the information which you had given us.
- When you submitted your expense report to accounting last week, there were significant discrepancies between three of the receipts and the amounts which you entered on the report. Accounting obviously scrutinized your report, which is why they called it to my attention. If they continue to find mistakes like this, I’m concerned that they may institute a policy that I have to sign off personally on every expense report submitted by our team. If that happens, it’s going to make more work for me. And because of this extra step, it will take you longer to get your expense reimbursements.

Notice how each of these statements clearly spells out a behavior pattern which evidenced itself in a specific situation and led to the impact described in the feedback. Can you see how this type of feedback makes for clearer communication and leaves less room for misunderstanding? As I said, the SBI is a simple, but powerful communication tool.

Separating Fact from Interpretation

Since the SBI model puts such emphasis on making only factual statements, how can you determine whether a statement is truly factual or is an interpretation disguising itself as fact?

Separating the two is remarkably easy. Someone's Behavior can only be experienced through what is seen or heard or experienced through one of the other senses. And since Behavior is only experienced through the senses, a factual description of Behavior must rely only on sensory-specific language.

In most cases, managerial feedback will be based on the manager's firsthand observation of the Behavior under discussion. But feedback can also be based on what others have seen or heard and which the manager has been able to verify. The key is to use only sensory-specific language when describing Behavior.

Any other description of a Behavior is an interpretation. It is the meaning which we have put on what we saw, heard, or felt. To illustrate, "You are too insecure when you make a presentation" sounds like a factual statement. But we cannot see insecurity, nor can we hear it or have a tactile sensation of it. We may see or hear things which are possibly evidence of insecurity. But in and of themselves, they are not insecurity. To describe a speaker as insecure is simply our interpretation of the evidence.

To use the SBI model in its purest and most effective form, we must guard against confusing facts about behavior with interpretation of behavior.

Now, in the Impact portion of the SBI model, interpretation may legitimately be made part of the conversation. One element of the Impact is often how people react because of the interpretation which they put on a particular Behavior. A statement like this is therefore perfectly legitimate within the SBI model: "In this morning's staff meeting, when you said X to the new employee, the tone in your voice sounded condescending to me. That's why I jumped to the employee's defense."

I might then follow with something to the effect of, "I'm not saying that you intended to be condescending. But that's how your remark came across to me. And if I heard it that way, others may have done so, as well. I'm sharing this with you in hope that will pay special attention to the tone you use when voicing a disagreement with others."

In casual conversation, we easily develop the habit of stating our opinions and judgments as though they were facts. We describe people and events routinely in non-sensory terms, yet state them as facts. "She's really smart." Or, "he really has a high opinion of himself." Or "they have no respect for the law." All stated as facts. All judgments masquerading as facts. The SBI Model, faithfully followed, prevents the masquerade.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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