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Great Feedback = Great Sales Teams

One of my wife's favorite shows is about a police detective that has a perfect photographic memory. She remembers every detail of every day of her life. Most of us lack this ability, we forget most of the things we see and, sadly, many of the people we meet. We do tend to remember every painful detail of the times when we've screwed up in our lives. This is why I'll never forget Monica Z. Monica worked for me as a sales rep on my first team when I was a new sales manager. I liked Monica and she was a bright, personable woman, but she struggled trying to make her sales quota. I tried to help her by encouraging and motivating her. "Monica, I know you can do it! I know you have what it takes!" Finally my general manager told me I had to let Monica go. I called Monica in on a Friday afternoon and gave her the bad news. She began to scream and shout, knocking a few items off my desk before stomping out and slamming my door hard enough to dislodge the door frame. The problem was that the "bad news" was just that: "news." Because of my desire to stay positive and encourage Monica, I had failed to give her any feedback. I had assumed that she knew what she was doing wrong and what to do to correct the problem. This was a lesson that I learned the hard way at Monica Z's expense. I made a vow never to surprise anyone in this manner again and have spent the last four decades studying the art of giving effective feedback. What follows is a synopsis of what I've learned about this important skill.

The dictionary defines "Feedback" as "information about a person's performance of a task used as a basis for improvement." Human progress in all areas is rooted in giving and receiving good feedback. Feedback is the tool that great teachers, great coaches and great managers use to help us reach our full potential. Writer and speaker Rick Tate says, "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." Geoff Colvin, author of *Talent is Overrated*, talks about the power of "deliberate practice" and the importance of having a good coach to offer corrective criticism as we learn a skill. He found that one of the things that sets really great people apart from the average person is that they actively seek out criticism and feedback. They tend to take a very clinical view of their performance and see feedback as a valuable tool to improve it. For most people, feedback is tangled up with their emotional state. Feedback, when delivered poorly can trigger a "fight or flight" response, causing them to ignore the advice or lash out at the person giving it to them.

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Many people are uncomfortable delivering negative feedback. They feel that they may offend the other person or that they are not qualified to criticize another. In their hesitancy to deliver criticism, many coaches try to “soften the blow” by being indirect or avoiding specifics. This leads to a lack of clarity which confuses the person needing help and usually makes them react with hostility to what they are being told.

We need to be aware of the impact our words have on others. As a supervisor our words carry extra weight, what a person might see as harmless teasing from a co-worker, may be seen as criticism from their boss. If a manager simply forgets to mention a person’s name when praising his/her team on the successful conclusion of a product, a person may see this oversight as a deliberate snub. The fear of exclusion from the group is hard wired deep in the human brain. The human psyche has a built-in sensitivity to negative feedback. We are always on the alert for criticism of our actions. Psychologists have deemed this “Negativity Bias.” This is why if almost everyone in a room praises a performer, but one person shows their disapproval, the performer will only remember and will dwell on that one negative person, forgetting all the others. This is why we need to be judicious with our negative feedback. If we constantly criticize a person’s work they will tune out our message and focus on their dislike of us. We need to be fair and honest with our feedback. Our positive comments should always far outnumber our negative ones. If we can’t find something good to say about a person’s performance, then we should fire them rather than torture them by constantly criticizing them. “Negativity bias” comes into play here as well, leading us to focus on the negatives and blinding us to a person’s good qualities

Timing is critical to offering good feedback. Feedback is most effective when delivered as soon as possible after the action you are criticizing or praising has occurred. For example, when field riding with a rep, rather than wait to the end of the day to give feedback, do a “mini debrief” after each call when the facts are fresh in everyone’s mind. Giving ongoing feedback also lets the rep apply the advice you’ve given them, providing you with an opportunity to reinforce the behavior by praising them. One exception to this rule is to never offer feedback when you are angry. It is far better to step away and revisit the issue at a later time, when you have had time to cool down. Giving feedback when you are mad may cause you to be harsher than the offense demands and you may irreparably harm your relationship with your rep.

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Make sure that your feedback is specific, clear and encourages the behavior you want to see. For example, saying that was a “great call” is ineffective. You have not defined why it was “great.” You should say something like, “I really liked how you asked the customer about his goals for the year. It really got her thinking about the need to advertise.” If you are too general, “You need to work on your call opening,” the rep will be frustrated because they will know you are upset with them, but will not know how to make things better. If you tell them, “You would get more people to talk to you if you used a benefit in your call opening like this...” Your reps are not mind readers, if you want them to do the things you want them to do—you have to tell them what you want them to do. Making them guess adds unnecessary stress to an already uncomfortable situation. It is also best to address one issue at a time. If you give them a string of criticisms, they may feel, “I can’t do anything right, what’s the use of trying.” If you give them one thing to work on they will think, “I can do that.” Improving someone’s performance is an incremental process. You fix one thing at a time until everything comes together.

In giving feedback, and in virtually all forms of communication, questions are one of the most powerful tools available. Research has shown that if the recipient of feedback sees the problem for themselves and wants to be helped, the session will be much more effective. Start by asking the rep about the problem and get their opinion. For example, instead of forcing advice on a rep, “Your numbers in the coupon section need to improve, here’s what I want you to do!” ask, “You and I know you’ve been struggling to hit budget on the coupon product, why do you think that is?” Listen carefully to the person’s response. They often know what the problem is, but don’t know how to correct it, “I’m having trouble explaining the value of coupons.” This acknowledgment of the problem shows that they are looking for help and will be open to a coaching session. If they respond with an excuse, “My customers just don’t like coupons,” follow up with another question, “The other members of your team are selling this product, why do you think your customers are not responding in the same way?” Your goal is to drill down until both you and the rep see the problem. The goal is to partner with your salesperson, so they will be open to your help.

The ability to give effective feedback is essential to your success in life. It is how we work together for our mutual benefit. Great feedback starts with

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the right intent. Feedback has to stem from a genuine desire to help another person grow. If you are criticizing another to exert power or to build your own sense of worth, it will be insincere and ineffective. To give effective feedback, you must be willing to ask for and accept constructive criticism. As a leader, you must constantly ask for feedback from your people as well as your superiors. This will show your team that being open to criticism plays a key role in a successful career. By mastering the art of giving feedback, you will not only improve the performance of your team, but you will build their morale. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be.” Great managers, who give great feedback, provide that inspiration.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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