

## **Creating a culture of feedback**

*360-degree feedback can be a way of life, not a program you impose*

(Published in the Canadian HR Reporter, September 13, 2004)

Formal 360 degree feedback processes can help create effective management and leadership cultures but HR professionals often struggle to obtain the resources — including senior leadership's commitment — required to implement them. Small to mid-size organizations, often find it particularly difficult to get the go-ahead to invest in a 360 feedback program.

But formal programs that solicit specific feedback on management and leadership practices from one's manager, peers and subordinates are not the only option for HR departments. The ultimate goal ought to be the creation of a culture where the giving and receiving of feedback flows freely on a daily basis and is expected and appreciated, understood and acted upon.

The HR function can play a significant role in making this happen, simply through modelling the behaviour the organization needs to see from all its leaders.

Here are five things HR practitioners can do that have no additional cost to the business.

- **Ask your HR team for feedback about yourself.** HR leaders must practice what they preach and regularly ask for feedback from staff about their leadership. This should lead to a culture within the HR team where there is a healthy exchange of ideas and opinions.
- HR employees interact with employees from other departments and all employees talk about their managers with other colleagues. When lunch time conversation turns to the current example of bad management behaviour, what's being said about the leader of the HR function?

Employees of the HR department should be saying, "When my manager did that to me, I talked with her about it and told her how upset I was. She asked me what I needed her to do differently and I told her. She listened, thanked me for the feedback and committed to making the change I asked for. So far she's kept that commitment. Why don't you try talking with your manager?"

In some cases, the manager may not be receptive to the feedback. At that point HR may have to step in either to talk with the manager, or if necessary the next person up the org. chart. But the first step should be to encourage the employee to offer the feedback.

If employees are intimidated by this prospect, someone from HR should offer to coach the employee to deliver feedback in a constructive, non-threatening way, so that the manager recognizes the feedback as something for the good of his team.

- **Ask for feedback about the HR team.** All managers can recall at least one horror story about a difficult time they had giving feedback — the employee took it badly, cried, debated or got angry and stormed out. It's no wonder people dread giving feedback. Hopefully, these same managers have also had some positive feedback experiences — the feedback was accepted, understood, acted upon and appreciated.

HR leaders should be asking for feedback often — especially when something has gone wrong.

It's common for organizations to spend large sums of money to obtain external customer feedback but ignore the free feedback that exists within the organization. HR departments need to lead the way in actively seeking feedback from managers (including the CEO) and employees about HR service levels, product offerings and accessibility and, just as importantly, widely share the feedback results.

Look for opportunities to encourage other departments to get feedback from their co-workers and colleagues. HR should be available to provide assistance to gather feedback and coach co-workers and colleagues through the process of accepting it, understanding it and acting upon it.

- **Provide feedback to colleagues.** Take every opportunity to tell peers when they've done something well. Feedback is feared because it's almost always the negative stuff that's shared. By providing honest positive feedback whenever possible, constructive criticism will be more welcomed.

Remember to always ask for permission to give feedback. Just because you want to give it doesn't mean they want it. As an HR leader, there are times when you are obligated to give feedback. But more often than not, feedback is a gift — an opportunity for a colleague to learn something that could help her become more effective. Tell colleagues you have feedback that could be helpful and then offer choice in whether and when they want it.

I'll never forget the time someone gave me unsolicited feedback just before an important presentation. My colleague didn't do this intentionally — she didn't know what was on my calendar. She had finally summoned the courage to give me the feedback and just had to do it then. It didn't occur to her that it might not be a good time for me. I wanted the feedback. I just would have appreciated having some input to when it was given so I was in the right headspace to accept it.

- **Coach employees on how to discuss issues and concerns with managers.**  
When an employee complains about a manager, 95 per cent of the time, the issue can't and shouldn't be resolved by HR. HR should not be taking on the problem. Instead, talk through the various options for solving the problem and the pros and cons for each.

Most employees can see why the manager would be upset if HR got involved. Most employees also need some help seeing things from the manager's perspective and to recognize their 50 per cent of the situation.

Many employees are willing to try talking with their managers knowing they have HR support in doing so and some coaching on how to do it the "right" way.

Sometimes it's helpful to give the manager a heads-up. Most will appreciate that HR didn't automatically take the employee's side and that the employee has been sent back to her to work things through. By providing the manager with some coaching on how to receive the employee, the odds of the feedback experience being a positive one for both, will be significantly enhanced. Follow up to debrief and to make sure the learning (giving and receiving feedback isn't so bad after all) is explicitly recognized.

- **Provide honest feedback to employees during the staffing process.** The internal staffing process is the ideal time to show employees how to give feedback. Too often, line managers and staffing consultants take the easy way out. "Jim, you didn't get the job because there was a more qualified candidate."

One manager told me, "If I tell an employee who doesn't report to me why they really didn't get the job, I could create a morale problem for the employee's manager." Another said, "How can I tell someone they're not service oriented based on a 45 minutes interview?"

There won't be a morale problem if the employee is given choice of receiving feedback after the interview process. The offer of feedback is provided at the time of the decline. If it's wanted, have the employee initiate the meeting at a later date once the disappointment of the decline has diminished.

When giving the feedback, don't tell someone they're not service oriented. That's just asking for denial and debate. Instead, try, "In the interview process you didn't provide evidence that you are service oriented." Outline the question asked, the answer given and contrast it to answers that other candidates gave.

Many employees will book the meeting and thank you for the feedback. "I finally know what it is I need to work on."

These five ideas represent just some of the feedback opportunities available to HR practitioners. Think about the number of interactions the HR team has with managers and employees across the entire organization in just one week. If even half of these opportunities are acted upon, there will be significant change in the organization in a year's time and progress will have been made in creating a more effective management and leadership culture.

*Karen Todd is a professional speaker, writer, and consultant. She can be reached at 416-284-6752, [karen@karentodd.com](mailto:karen@karentodd.com), or visit [www.karentodd.com](http://www.karentodd.com)*