

Psychology of Feedback and Improving Relationships Between Management and Employees

Discussion Points for Ski CLE

Complaints and the Hourglass

- Complaints are a two-sided coin, and management often views complaints as a liability as opposed to an asset/opportunity for improvement
- As a result, complaints often are bottlenecked by frontline management in the middle of the hourglass, either trapped or slowly trickling down
- When employees feel like their complaints are not heard, they will turn to someone who is willing to listen – a plaintiff’s attorney, union steward, or a government agency such as the EEOC or DOL, or leave your company to work for a competitor. (replacement costs, etc.)
- Employee turnover stories:
 - Creation of environments where employees “are just an employee number” to their managers.
 - Complaints/opportunities for improvement/or general feedback from rank and file employees on operational weaknesses met with deaf ears.
- Feedback can trigger a host of chemical responses in the brain

Understanding the brain’s response to criticism – the biology of feedback

- Amygdala (Lizard brain, fight or flight) vs. Prefrontal Cortex (reasoning, rationality, impulse control)
- Why we need our amygdala- crucial role in threat detection, hard wired to respond to threats/danger, body’s alarm system
- When we hear negative feedback, some get trapped in the amygdala
 - If an employee feels psychologically unsafe, overactive amygdala
 - The prefrontal cortex is less active, impairing ability to regulate emotion and more challenging to think clearly and make effective decisions.
 - Discussion of spectrum disorders, using my son as an example – Jack and his overactive amygdala

Long-term effects of negative feedback on employee motivation

- A staggering 70% of employees feel disengaged at work and are just malingering it in.
- This is a wake-up call for management underestimating the collateral damage of failing to listen to complaints and delivering damaging criticism
 - Additionally, it’s devastating to employee satisfaction/morale for managers being inconsistent with negative feedback, or, even worse, when the manager themselves are providing negative feedback for behaviors they embody. (“Do as I say, not as I do”)
- How do you balance performance management in the face of potentially coddling employees?
 - Create environment for frequent (and, if possible, in person) communication on a regular basis. Scheduled or otherwise.
 - Allows for issues to be addressed in a timely manner, instead of frustrations (likely both ways) to reach a boil come performance review time.

- Also, “employees don’t know what they don’t know.” Same goes for management. Assumptions on bad data can be devastating for EE/ER relations.

Creating Psychological Safety when delivering feedback or receiving complaints

- The goal is to frame the feedback in a constructive manner to nudge employees out of their amygdala and up to their prefrontal cortex
 - Framing feedback as a connection, not a threat
 - Using your own physiological awareness in delivering feedback/receiving complaints
 - Feedback: “We care about you and your growth.” “Want you to succeed.” “Sharing this because I believe in you.”
 - Receiving complaints: “We appreciate your attention to detail with this issue.” Inviting the complainer to come up with potential solutions, encouraging creativity.
 - Maintaining kindness in tone and respect, while speaking the truth. “Partnering on a plan to improve”
- Starts with leadership setting the tone in fostering psychological safety by modeling desired behaviors – this includes listening to complaints, acknowledging mistakes, and demonstrating vulnerability.
 - To piggyback off of this point, the difference between good and great companies is always culture. Any company can have great employees, great systems/processes/procedures, but none of that works if there is an awful workplace culture. Having leadership modeling the behaviors they want employees to repeat is essential for creating a positive culture.
- Active listening, non-judgmental feedback, and respectful communication fosters psychological safety
- Foster inclusivity – encouraging cognitive diversity (the neuro spicies!) as a driving factor of innovation and sharing ideas. ADHD can be a superpower if it’s correctly harnessed.
 - Importance of awareness of generational differences in providing feedback
- Create time for in-person employee interaction. Post-Covid, the number one complaint from disgruntled employees is a perceived lack of caring from management. Set aside time to visit employees where they work, if possible.