From the President

Giving and Receiving Feedback (A Mini Training)

Shakespeare once said, “Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” Consider an example. You walk down the hallway at your workplace and pass a new employee. You give a cheery “hello” and they don’t respond to you. You think to yourself – “WOW, that person is certainly stuck up. I don’t like them. I’ll keep my distance.” Another person walks down the hallway and passes the same employee. They give a cheery “hello” and the new employee doesn’t respond to them. That person thinks to themselves – “WOW, that newbie looks totally overwhelmed and distracted. I think I’ll invite them to lunch.”

What happened here? The behavior is the same – no response to a hello. But because the thinking, the interpretation, of that behavior is different, the resulting action becomes totally different.

Consider for a moment. We can observe behavior, but we have no idea what motivated it. And yet, how often do we interpret someone’s behavior in a negative light – perhaps without even realizing we have done so? Further, how often do we then go to that person to check out what happened? Instead, how often do we go to another person and say, “Let me tell you what just happened to me!! Can you believe what they said/did?!” And we report *our interpretation* of the interaction. Now we have triangulation.

Triangulation in relationships refers to a communication pattern where one person avoids direct interaction with another, instead using a third person as a sounding board or intermediary. This can create additional misunderstandings and conflicts. The more the story is told, the more likely it is that negative connotations and interpretations multiply. What began as an interpretation, an assumption, becomes fact, and others now believe the same “facts”.

The alternative: direct communication to the person with whom the original interaction occurred, that is, giving feedback.

Recently I had a conversation over coffee with a friend who was trying to give me feedback about something I had done that hurt her feelings. My response was to give her my rationale for why I did what I did. A few days looking back on that conversation, I realized that I hadn’t really heard her or taken in her feedback because I was being defensive. Moreover, at that moment, I had no awareness that I was being defensive! My defensiveness was totally in my blind spot.

What might have helped me, in that moment, would have been if my friend had stopped the conversation and said to me: “Nancy, would you be open to some feedback about how this conversation is going?” (“Sure”) “I am noticing that when you said […] you were giving a reason for why you did […] The impact on me is that I feel you aren’t listening to what I’m trying to tell you. PAUSE. I’m wondering if we could start again with your trying to listen and understand what I’m saying to you.”

It’s certainly possible that I still wouldn’t have been able to switch gears and truly listen but knowing how I have reacted to direct feedback in the past, it’s more likely that by holding up the mirror, I would have become aware of my defensiveness, enabling me to make a course correction in that moment, apologize, and begin to truly listen.

Many years ago, when working as an Organization Effectiveness consultant at a hospital in Bloomington, IN, one of my goals was to train every single employee in a model of Giving and Receiving Feedback and embed that communication approach into the organizational culture. The model we used at that hospital has five steps for giving feedback and five steps for receiving feedback. Now bear with me while I put on my trainer hat!

Giving Feedback:

Step 1: Ask the Receiver: "Nancy, are you open to some feedback?" This gives the receiver a heads up and a moment to get grounded and receptive.

Step 2: State the OBSERVATION – "I noticed…" "You said…" "You did…" The observation is NOT an interpretation. It is an observable, specific objective fact that both parties can agree on because it factually happened. Stating the specific observed behavior should have no judgement attached. Sometimes feedback is too ambiguous or general for the receiver to understand. "I've noticed that you often interrupt me when I'm speaking." While this is observable, it's not specific. A concrete specific example would be more helpful.

Step 3: State the EFFECT, the IMPACT of the behavior on you or the organization. "The impact was that I felt hurt." "The impact was that I didn't feel heard." This is the time when you share what happened to you or to the organization because of the behavior. This is subjective. There should be no judgement here, no blame, just a statement of how the behavior affected you or the organization.

Step 4: PAUSE (simply stop talking for a moment – time for the receiver to digest)

Step 5: Reinforce, Redirect, Suggest – "In the future, it would be helpful if you would …" [suggest the new behavior]"

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Receiving Feedback: The critical elements of receiving feedback are: (1) Take a deep breath. Get yourself grounded, so you can be receptive. (2) Actively listen - carefully. (3) Control your responses, that is, avoid arguing or defending. If you do not understand the behavior mentioned, ask for clarification or a specific example. Especially if a behavior is in your blind spot, you might have minimal awareness of it. It's impossible to change behavior if you don't understand what behavior to change! (4) Next, indicate that you've listened by paraphrasing or restating the other's point of view. (5) Finally, thank them for the feedback (always!).

Feedback is a gift. It takes courage to approach someone directly. Giving feedback also offers a learning opportunity for the receiver, an opportunity to help someone gain more self-awareness. Direct feedback also decreases triangulation and builds trust by increasing the ability to talk to each other openly, honestly and without judgment.

"Nancy, would you be open to some feedback?" "Yes. Thank you."

In peace,

Nancy