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Tell Them The Truth

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When employees in most organizations are asked what they would like more of from their managers, their first response is usually feedback. People want to know where they stand -- they want to know if your perception of their performance is the same as their own. They want to know the connection between their performance and their potential for growth in the organization. The more honest and realistic you can be, the more growth potential for your people.

Even the high potentials in your organization need honest, balanced feedback. Too often they hear only how wonderful, bright, and talented they are. Without feedback, these employees can come to a startling, shocking halt after several promotions, big raises, and starring roles. Why? Because no one helped them see their rough edges and the need for continual improvement.

When the truth is missing, people feel demoralized, less confident, and ultimately are less loyal. Research overwhelmingly supports the notion that engaged employees are "in the know." They want to be trusted with the truth about the business, including its challenges and downturns.

When you have bad news, give it face-to-face and as soon as possible. If you make a mistake, confess, tell them the truth, and accept responsibility. Your personal stock will go up and so will the trust level on your team. If you believe that giving truthful, balanced feedback to people will help them to be more effective in their careers and perhaps in life, then you will be more inclined to give that feedback.

Think about the people who work with you or report to you. Consider their relative strengths and weaknesses, their blind spots, and the flaws that may stall them. Have you been honest and direct about your perceptions with these people? When and how did you give them your input? Even the best bosses might honestly confess that they have trouble giving people direct feedback, especially about areas where employees need improvement.

Most of us were not trained to give negative news. We were taught that "honesty is the best policy," but we also learned, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." So we don't. Our research led us to interview managers about their hesitation to provide critical feedback. Their honest answers included the following:

- I'm concerned about appearing arrogant or abrasive
- It's my own personal discomfort
- It just seems easier to give the positive side
- I'm not sure I'm 100% right
- It's the defensiveness that I often get in response
- We're a polite organization, it's just not our culture
- I don't like to judge other people

While these are all understandable, it is critical to push past these inhibitors and provide this information. When truth is not told, it hinders trust building and stifles professional development. If this is difficult, consider asking your employee to provide their own point of view first. Ask them to tell you what areas of their performance they feel best about. Ask them to tell you about a success they had.

You can also provide the opportunity for them to tell you where they most need to grow. Ask about a recent project that they might do differently if they had the chance. You might even ask them who would have handled it differently

and how? Or, you might ask them what one thing would significantly improve their effectiveness.

They know the answers to these questions. If you have built trust, then giving employees a chance to consider their choices and reflect on their own decision making can open the door to an excellent opportunity for feedback and perhaps confirmation from you.

Here's something else you can try. Jot down the names of each of your direct reports. Next to each name write the words "more of," "less of" and "continue." See if you can provide a few straight forward answers to each of these prompts. What do you want them to do more of? What behaviors get in the way of their effectiveness? What should they do less of? And, what behaviors do you appreciate and hope they continue? Continue to offer these three messages throughout the year and you'll be on your way!

Telling the truth goes both ways. Consider asking direct reports to give you feedback? The absence of truthful, balanced feedback creates leaders who have missed the opportunity to grow, to be even more effective in their jobs, and to keep their talented people. Managers are simply more effective if they are open to changing their own behaviors. If you take feedback from your team to heart and show them that you are working on improvement yourself, (perhaps even invite their help) you are modeling the very behavior that you want to see in your employees and you can establish an environment where truth is welcome.
