

How Am I Doing?

Too few managers ever seek that imperative feedback from their subordinates.

BY OREN HARARI

Among the interesting things ex-New York mayor Ed Koch used to do during his term of office was to periodically ask citizens a simple question: “How’m I doin’?” The fact that Mayor Koch would continue to ask that question is one reason he remained popular with many New Yorkers despite the emergence of some embarrassing scandals during the final years of his tenure.

What is the significance of that simple little question? Certainly, voters like having their opinions solicited in a direct, personal manner. So do employees and customers, for that matter. But I think there is something else going on. Most of us run our careers assuming—or hoping—that we’re doing just fine with our employees, bosses, colleagues, regulators, customers and any other relevant constituency. Sometimes we’re right, sometimes we’re wrong. But is it wise to run our careers like a crap shoot? Common sense would tell us that if we can gather valid feedback about ourselves, we are more likely to adjust our behavior so as to be more effective in influencing people and achieving our goals.

It is an interesting anomaly in organizational life that even as we

hunger for useful information to help our performance and career, few of us ask for specific feedback about ourselves in the direct and personal way that Mayor Koch did. And to complete the conspiracy of silence, people who do have the information we need often don’t provide it to us. They remain quiet, especially if the news is bad or the information is unpleasant. But if we are shielded from negative information, we do not confront what needs to be confronted.

Feedback Is Essential

Eventually, we wind up facing distressing situations that could have been avoided, like a customer or valued employee leaving us “without warning,” or a cash flow crisis that erupts “out of the blue,” or an “unheard of” competitor who enters our industry with a new technology, or a “surprising” performance review from our boss. Without specific feedback, we sometimes wind up tormenting ourselves when we suspect that something is wrong: We worry at work and at home trying to guess what the problem might be and what we ought to do about it.

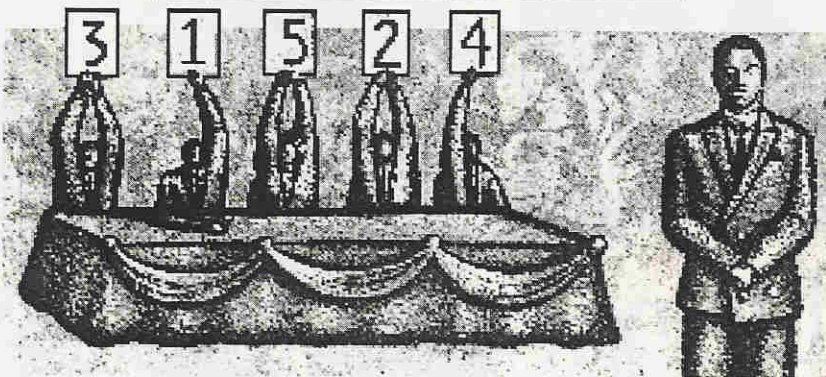
Things aren’t much better when the information is positive. One could

argue that positive feedback is an endangered species in many organizations. It’s a curious cultural norm that people often are remarkably reticent about giving someone concrete feedback (including praise) when he or she is doing something right. But if we are shielded from information that is positive, we may inadvertently stop doing the right things. If nobody tells us that we’re on the right track, we lose important information that could augment our performance, not to mention our self-esteem.

The bottom line is, you’ve got to ask. If you wait for employees or customers or anyone else to tell you what you’re doing well or not well, you’ll be waiting a long time. If you want to avoid land mines and seize opportunities, patience is not necessarily a virtue. I am reminded of a cartoon I recently saw at a state fair. Two big, mangy vultures are sitting on a branch overlooking a deserted landscape. One vulture finally says to the other, “Patience, my a—. I’m gonna go kill something.” Instead of assuming timely feedback will come to you, go out and get it.

Paul Stewart did. In 1990, Paul was director of clinical services at Merle West Medical Center in Klamath

HOW EFFECTIVE AM I AS A MANAGER?



CIRCLE ONE

- | | | |
|---|-----------|--|
| 1. He'll wait until things settle down. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He really likes change. |
| 2. Most of his staff meetings are about internal procedures and budgeting. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He feels top management should make the first move. |
| 3. If there's a way, he'll find it. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He feels top management should make the first move. |
| 4. He'll wait for orders from above. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He wants to get things done right away. |
| 5. He seeks responsibilities beyond his job description. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He fulfills his job description. |
| 6. He asks himself "How can I enhance revenue? Add value?" | 1 2 3 4 5 | focuses on staying within budget and making plans. |
| 7. He feels his people should "challenge the system." | 1 2 3 4 5 | He carefully reviews his subordinates' work. |
| 8. If he hasn't been told yes, he can't do it. | 1 2 3 4 5 | If he hasn't been told no, he can do it. |
| 9. He takes responsibility for his failures. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He usually makes excuses for his failures. |
| 10. He won't take risks because he might fail. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He takes risks even though he might fail. |
| 11. He feels we need to do things faster. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He feels we can't turn things around that fast. |
| 12. He wants to know what other departments are doing and what their needs are. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He protects his own departments. |
| 13. He talks mainly to those people who are formally linked to him. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He'll go beyond the organizational chart to share information and resources. |
| 14. "Leave me and my people alone and let us get our job done." | 1 2 3 4 5 | He'll cross departmental lines to get the job done. |
| 15. He truly trusts only a few people within the hospital. | 1 2 3 4 5 | He volunteers to share ideas and resources with people in other departments. |

Falls, Ore. He read an article that Linda Mukai and I wrote in *Management Review* titled "A New Decade Demands a New Breed of Manager" (August 1990). At the end of the article, we challenged readers to ask their colleagues (including subordinates) to fill out a 15-point questionnaire that rated them as managers.

Stewart read the article and quickly modified the questionnaire to a customized version, which he then administered to his department (see box). He asked them to evaluate him on the 15 questions. For example, in question 1, a score of "1" means that the statement to the left most accurately describes Paul's management style; a score of "5" means that the statement to the right is more accurate.

Here's how to evaluate the scoring: For questions numbered 1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 13, 14 and 15, simply add up the scores. For questions 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 and 12, flip the scale so that a score of 1 becomes 5, 2 becomes 4, 4 becomes 2 and 5 becomes 1. As Linda Mukai and I wrote in our original article, "A score of 60 means you have the mind-set of an effective manager. If you scored below 45, you have some work to do." Paul Stewart scored 56.5 (the sum of the average scores for each question); a good score with some room for improvement.

I wasn't surprised that Paul fared well. I've noticed a curious paradox in organizations. Poorer managers are the ones who really need feedback from all sorts of people inside and outside the organization. However, they are much less likely than effective managers to solicit such feedback and more likely not to hear such feedback even if it is given. In fact, it is not uncommon for poorer managers to shoot messengers of bad news, thus ensuring that they will not receive valuable information in the future. Paul Stewart—one of the better managers, according to the questionnaire results and his reputation in the hospital—found that in terms of statistical averages, he received high marks on virtually every question. But disturbing to him was that the range of scores was uncom-

fortably high, a look at the actual distribution of raw scores revealed that some subordinates rated him a "1," others a "2," others a "3" and so on. Paul was bothered by the lack of consensus. "I've got some work to do," he confessed, and proceeded to dig into it further by talking directly to his people about the results. Thus, he gained further clarity about how he comes across to his people, and improved his management skills in the process.

The moral of this story is absurdly simple. Solicit feedback about your performance sincerely, regularly and personally. Canvass people's ideas and suggestions too. I am not suggesting that you become an insecure obsessive puppet whose strings are pulled by others. Nor am I suggesting that you give up your goals and principles if somebody disagrees. Rather, I am proposing that your organization's interests and your interests are best served when you judiciously and honestly accumulate information about yourself, for by accumulating information you accumulate power.

You don't need a consultant to do this for you. Remember that too often the definition of a consultant is someone who takes your wristwatch, tells you what time it is, and then bills you. Apart from the cost, third parties can keep you buffered from the realities you must personally confront. The number one leadership principle delineated by the U.S. Army is "Know yourself and seek self-improvement." One sentence explaining this principle

is revealing: "If you really want to know about yourself, ask another leader who is the same grade and who sees you work as a leader." I believe that you should ask a wider array of constituencies, but the Army's point is well taken: This is a responsibility you shouldn't delegate or abdicate to a third party.

Paul Stewart developed his own questionnaire, and followed up on it with group meetings of his direct reports. He has continued this feedback process ever since. He has learned that nothing replaces the personal eyeball-to-eyeball "how'm I doin'?" be it with direct reports in a meeting, with a supplier at a trade show or with a colleague (or boss) over lunch.

In summary, three quick points: First, ask straight. Probe for specifics if you think something important is lurking under the surface. You may have to do this for a while before people trust you enough to open up, but persist. Show yourself worthy of the information you need.

Second, ask only if you really want to hear some candid replies. If you don't want to hear bad news with the good, or if you're not prepared to follow up and do something about the

bad news, asking is even worse than not asking.

Third, don't worry about asking too often. I know you'll use common sense. Besides, you know that the real problem in management is not that managers ask too frequently. Most managers don't ask at all, and if they do, they ask far too infrequently, far too obliquely, or far too formally (the once-a-millennium attitude survey) to make the process

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meaningful.

The late Sam Walton defined good management in terms of "listening." It's an art that reflects integrity and requires practice. Do yourself a favor and don't wait for feedback to come to you. Develop your own personal listening strategy and persevere in implementing it.

And if you need a little personal incentive, you might be interested to know that as of June 1992, at the ripe young age of 35, Paul Stewart was promoted to CEO of Merle West Medical Center. ■■■

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