Silence Isn't Golden: Why Feedback Doesn't Happen in Organizations

Remember the musical, *The King and I*? One of my favorite songs in that show is called "A Puzzlement." The king describes his confusion about the way the world works. He sings of his, "…confusion about the conclusion I concluded long ago." I agree. Lots of things that happen in the workplace cause me to scratch my head and wonder. Feedback is one of those things. We all know that feedback is the only way we can really understand what we're doing effectively so we can do more of it as well as providing us with the opportunity to uncover those things we're doing that get in the way of success. So, it should follow that seeking feedback is a part of our daily actions, but more often than not, it isn't even in our daily thoughts. And if feedback is rare in a peer to peer environment, it seems to be virtually non-existent in the employee to boss world.

Looking for ways to solve the puzzle, I asked a group of HR professionals to share their views on the barriers that prevent employees from giving their bosses feedback. Their responses were immediate and enlightening.

Fear is the biggest barrier to giving upward feedback. Over 50% of the respondents mentioned fear – fear of retaliation, repercussions, or confrontations, among others. It is easy (and I believe accurate) to draw the conclusion that many people in today's workplaces think that telling the truth is a dangerous activity.

How can you give feedback to someone you never see? Leaders who never seem to leave their offices, or when they do, walk through the workplace at such a clip that they are obviously unapproachable, make it difficult to make the one on one contact feedback requires. "I have," you say with a touch of indignation in your voice, "an open door policy!" Remember that your open door still puts the burden for giving **you** feedback on the other person who must get up and walk through your door. See the previous paragraph!

Leaders seem disinterested in getting feedback. Attitudes of leaders seem to parallel those of parents of teenaged children. Parent's lips say, "You can tell me anything" as their actions scream, "I'm not listening," "Don't tell me the bad stuff," and/or "Can't we talk about this later."

A strong chain of command structure makes it difficult – if not impossible – for feedback to travel directly. If your organization has policies (either formal or informal) that restrict the flow of general information, those policies will be applied to feedback, big time. Helpful feedback is should be delivered by the person who has something to say directly to the person who needs to hear it. Feedback delivered by a third party is always diluted.

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I'd give feedback, but when I do, nothing seems to happen or change. Teaching people how to give people feedback isn't enough. You need to help people learn what to do with the feedback they've been given. Not all feedback leads to change, but when feedback is directed at a leader and nothing happens, the feedback giver deserves a response that lets them know that they has, at least been heard and their message considered. (Remember a response to feedback doesn't mean you have to agree with the feedback, it does mean you have to consider it carefully and explain your action or non-action in an understandable context.) As I've often said to the Senior Leadership Teams I work with, "The opposite of love isn't hate, it's apathy!" When a leader doesn't close the loop after an employee has been brave enough to deliver feedback, why would an employee go out of their way to give more feedback? That's where apathy starts.

So, with the words and music of Rogers & Hammerstein echoing in my head, I continue to wonder why leaders make feedback so much more difficult that it ought to be.

If my lord in heaven, Buddha, show the way,
Every day I do my best for one more day.
But, it's a puzzlement!