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GREAT MANAGING: A Newsletter for Leaders & Managers
Volume 9, Issue 15, August 15, 2010
Publisher: Critical Path Consultants
<http://www.laurieford.com>
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Changing Communication Practices

The managers in Jeffrey's class have been examining their communication practices by collecting a sample of the conversations they actually have with people at work. One of the things they are discovering is that their conversations are contributing to the failure to get what they want and need from other people. Prior to doing all this work, the students were convinced the poor performance of others was entirely the other person's fault. They are now changing how they communicate and are getting much more favorable results.

Leadership Training

At the Academy of Management Meetings in Montreal (a meeting of approximately 10,000 management professors), Jeffrey attended a session where the new leadership program he learned at the USAFA was presented. There were over 50 management professors in attendance and many were very interested in learning more about what is called the Ontological Leadership Model. We will provide more on this model in future issues.

MANAGEMENT TIP and TECHNIQUE #186

The Challenge of Giving Feedback, Part II
Jeffrey and Laurie Ford

Overview

In our previous issue, we talked about the challenge of

giving feedback and Jeffrey's experience with giving exam grades back to the managers in his MBA class. Since then, Jeffrey has encountered still more challenges, making it even more clear why some managers avoid performance reviews and giving people straight feedback on their work.

Feedback and Performance Evaluation

The purpose of giving feedback is to provide information that someone can use to maintain or improve his or her performance. Giving feedback is one way to start – or continue – getting high quality work from people: you let them know what you think they are doing well, and you tell them where they need to make improvements. Without this information, people will assume things are fine and keep doing whatever they have been doing.

If people don't get useful feedback prior to their annual performance review, they are likely to be upset to learn that everything they're doing is not "excellent". People want to improve their performance before the review. Every manager has heard something like, "You didn't tell me," or "I didn't know" after giving someone a less-than-stellar performance review.

Do We Avoid Accountability for Poor Performance?

What Jeffrey is seeing is that when you provide feedback, you are also calling people to account for (explain) their performance. And, when the performance is not up to expectation, some people become defensive.

Accountability begins when we agree to do something for someone else. As soon as we accept a request and say, "Yes, I will", we have made ourselves accountable to the other person for keeping our agreement with them.

Once we've said, "Yes", we either keep our agreement or we don't. If we are late, or don't meet the criteria of the agreement, our performance falls in that less-than-stellar category, at best. When that happens, most people would prefer to postpone that performance review, and avoid the accountability conversation.

The Embarrassment of Learning

When people receive feedback indicating their performance is deficient in some way, they can lose sight of the fact that they once wanted to learn, grow, and develop themselves. Suddenly, the most important issue is to preserve our dignity and avoid looking bad to other people.

People want to be well regarded, respected, and seen as competent. Of course, they want to avoid being embarrassed, or have someone question their ability. It is natural to try to explain poor performance, or give reasons for lateness or low quality results.

The challenge is to find a way to return people to remembering the good intention behind even negative-sounding feedback: we want to use the facts of our results today to help us improve our results in the future.

Laurie says the worst thing about learning something new is that you have to admit – even if only to yourself – you didn't already know that. We can see it in children: people are embarrassed to discover they have made a mistake, even something as simple as mispronouncing or misspelling a word. Everyone wants to be the person who “already knows that”.

When Feedback Gets Through

In our last issue, we asked the question, “Why Bother?” If providing anything other than positive feedback is going to make people upset and unleash a bunch of excuses and blaming, then why bother?

One reason is because sometimes feedback gets through. During the last two weeks, Jeffrey has had many students in his office wanting to discuss their grades and find out what they can do to score higher on the final exam. In each case:

1. Jeffrey asks what they did to prepare for the first exam.
2. The student admits that his or her preparation was weak. One student said, “I just skimmed the reading material. I know the exam was a straight test of what you taught in class. Your exam caught me – I was trying to skate through”.
3. They talk until they identify what the student can change about study habits or exam preparation to get a higher grade.

Jeffrey is now seeing a “learning response” to feedback, instead of just the “blame-and-explain” response he saw last month. Most students are committed to learning the material of the course, but many are also willing to learn ways to improve their performance on exams and class assignments.

Sure, they don't want to look bad, and may resent getting a less-than-stellar grade, but they will take the challenge to make changes so they perform well the next time. Feedback can be tough, but it's worth the bother.

Conclusion

There are competing motivations around feedback. We want to learn, and we want to avoid looking bad. Many managers are uncomfortable giving straight feedback, because they will be stepping into this delicate terrain.

Jeffrey uses an article in his class called, "The Folly of Rewarding A while Hoping for B". When we say we want to support people in being better performers, but then reward them for just getting by, that's a folly. Great managers who want high performance and accountability will take the trouble to give honest feedback, in service of developing the people in their charge.

GREAT MANAGING QUOTES

When a man doesn't know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind.

---Seneca

Without deviation, progress is not possible.

---Frank Zappa

A life lived in fear is a life half lived.

---Baz Luhrman

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