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Coaching and Feedback: Are We Confused Here?

Have you had someone, especially someone who outranked you at work, pronounce the deadly words, “Come to my office, I’d like to give you some feedback...” Or maybe your spouse, with that certain look in his/her eye, said to you, “Let’s talk, I’d like to give you some feedback...” Deadlier words are seldom spoken, and it’s enough to make a grown person quiver, right?

So I’d like here to clarify what we think “feedback” is and isn’t, and also to distinguish between two models or processes of interpersonal communication that seem to get confused in their use: Feedback and Coaching.

Feedback

The context in which we use the term feedback most frequently occurs between two people and refers to a communication intended to convey the emotional impact of another person’s behavior of one person on another. We use the model **S-B-I** (Situation-Behavior-Impact) to convey this concept:

- Situation – What was the specific instance, identified in time and place, if possible, and as soon after the situation as is feasible (given cool-down time, appropriateness of the place and time for giving feedback, and receptiveness of the person receiving the feedback, etc). The format might be, for example, “During our conversation yesterday in your office, when we were talking about the order for client X...”
- Behavior – What did the person physically do, what did it look like, what was said (specific words used, tone of voice, etc.) We should pretend that we have a camera and are filming the specific behavior, e.g. “You raised your voice and said my idea for handling the order was foolish...”
- Impact -- The emotional impact of that behavior, i.e. how I felt about your behavior. Sometimes what I thought is included, but we think that centering the feedback on the emotional component of the feedback process makes it clearer (and easier to distinguish from Coaching). We ask participants in our programs to become more fluent in their emotional vocabulary, and to say something like, “I felt frustrated...” or “I felt threatened...” rather than, “I felt bad.”

Of course, the above example is of “negative feedback”, based on a negative impact perceived. Although it seems that feedback is frequently more negative than positive, we should also include “positive feedback”, when the impact perceived is positive. For example, “During our conversation..., you complimented me on my handling of client X’s order, I felt enthused...” or “...gratified.”

We try to avoid the word “that” after “I felt...”, because “that” is frequently followed by the word “...that you...” When this happens, we are no longer talking about an emotion of our own, but rather about some judgment we are making about the feedback receiver, such as “I felt that you were unjust/unfair/unkind, etc...”, especially when the feedback is negative.

In other words, the SBI Feedback Model is basically used best when people are trying to communicate to each other how they are impacted emotionally by the other’s behavior. Since much of our world of interpersonal communications revolves around how we feel about each other and the behavior we exhibit to each other, the Model works best in that realm.

Coaching

The communication process is, we believe, different when we are doing “coaching”. The purpose of this process is to sound out with another person a given problem, seek agreement on solution(s), and provide measurement and support around results. We use the Model POEMS to describe this process:

- Problem – What is the concern we are dealing with, what problem area or difficulty is involved? For example, “Client X’s business, or service needs, or order issues....”
- Options – What options do we have, what do you think we should do, what can we do to solve whatever we have agreed upon as the Problem(s)?
- Expectations – What are your expectations for this business, what does the Company expect us to do, what are my expectations for you...?
- Measurement – How do we measure progress on solving the problem(s), how do we know we are getting someplace in our solution. (Usually involves “milestones” or “signposts” along the way.)
- Support – What support do you need from me, or from others, or other systems that need to be in place in order to insure forward movement...?

The Coaching process is sometimes thought to be a top-down one, manager to employee, but we also know that coaching can happen upward as well, when we are “managing upward”. Of most significant note is what we have called “horizontal coaching” or “mutual coaching”, where people, or team members, can help each other in identifying steps along the POEMS Model and help each other to be better at their jobs.

For example, we have worked over several years with a large international company with subsidiaries across the Latin American continent. Where Coaching in this company was once thought to be the purview of a boss’s interventions with his/her employee “coachees”, the concept was broadened to include managers who needed assistance or advice from parallel people in other countries and could use the POEMS model to give and receive assistance from others who would “coach” them where needed. This opened up a whole new area of mutual support that had been previously under-utilized.

Now looked at in the fashion described above, we have a system for distinguishing between the two processes, Feedback and Coaching, and making fruitful use of each where required. When we have a message we would like to give to someone, at home or work, about emotional impact, i.e. how we perceive his/her behavior in terms of the way we feel connected to the person, this is feedback. We should remember that feedback can and should be both positive (when we are positively impacted) as well as negative. In fact, studies show that the power of negative feedback is perhaps four times as heavy as positive feedback, so that we are advised to have a “bank account” of positive messages on which to draw on when we have to give a negative one.

The latter is, for example, the advice given in a well-known manual on leadership behaviors, *The One-Minute Manager*.¹ One of the behaviors suggested is to “catch people doing things right”, and then to give them one minute of praising. We suggest that this minute (or less) be formatted around the SBI model as described above.

It is also useful to remember, and suggested in many sources on correct feedback behaviors, that our attitude behind the behaviors should be a helpful one for the person receiving feedback. That is, it should be considered a gift, not a criticism, and delivered in a positive way. Most of all, the feedback should serve the person receiving it, not the one giving it. If we are careful to remove any taint of self-interest when we provide feedback, we will come closer to providing information that people need be more successful in their emotional impacts.

A second caveat is that feedback is about our perceptions, not The Truth. Of course, anyone’s perception is the truth for that person, so we ignore people’s perceptions at our own risk.

Another caveat, unlike coaching, is that we cannot expect to produce any change in people's behavior when we give them feedback. The only person whose behavior we can change, as Michael Jackson has sung, is that of "the man in the mirror"-- ourselves. We hope that both positive and negative feedback will be useful, that positively impacting behaviors will be repeated and that negatively impacting behaviors will be curtailed. But we cannot legislate behavior for the person receiving feedback – even if we believe we "outrank" him or her in the organization or the family. That person is in charge of his/her behaviors and has to take responsibility for them and the impact they produce.

On the other hand, Coaching is about behavior change. What we're trying to do when we're coaching is to influence the behavior of the coachee in productive ways: solving problems, listening to and suggesting options and expectations, and helping to structure measurement processes. We are also looking at what support mechanisms the coachee needs, and where he/she can access them. When we are asking for and receiving coaching, we are hoping to find a source for thinking and problem solving, for sounding out options and expectations, and also some guidance and support in structuring our work.

It's important to note that everyone needs Coaching at some time or another, and that all of us should be available to our colleagues for coaching when they are in need. This makes Coaching an even more powerful tool when its use spreads throughout the organization and colleagues perceive each other as resources to be accessed when we need them.

Mixing the Two

We have been asked if it's possible to mix the two processes in a single setting: our answer is, not likely. Once the emotional content of feedback has been introduced into the coaching model, the risk is high that it will contaminate objectivity in identifying problems, options, expectations, measurement, and support. HOWEVER, we have frequently seen in our training sessions in coaching that a coachee will express frustration, or anger, or disappointment about a certain problem area. Our advice, if we hear the words, "I feel frustrated," or "angry", is to heed the flashing light and STOP the coaching process until the emotional content can be handled. "Say more about your feelings of" is an effective tool for drawing the person out in this emotional area. Avoid at all costs responses like: "You shouldn't feel that way" or "Let's get back to the main problem..." Until this emotional context is explored, likely the coaching process won't get very far.

At the same time, the coach is not expected to be the solver of emotional difficulties. But we ask coaches to listen first, to see if just inviting the coachee to ventilate will allow a more or less direct return to the POEMS model. If not, it may be time to call for reinforcements from the HR department!!

REFERENCE

¹ Kenneth Blanchard & Spencer Johnson, *The One-Minute Manager*, William Morrow & Co., New York, ©1982.