



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Do You Know How You're Doing?

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What's the single most important thing you can do to:

- Increase your influence at work?
- Convince your boss you are a top performer?
- Win a promotion?
- Get noticed by senior management?
- Get more interviews?
- Turn more interviews into offers?

The answer to all of these is the same—find out what you could be doing better!

Remember the recently deceased Ed Koch's catchphrase when he was mayor of New York City: "*How'm I doing?*" He said it so often that it probably became a joke to many of us, but I guarantee you he got lots of valuable input from people!

What do you think those closest to you, those whom you work with every day, the senior managers who can be so important to your future career opportunities, your clients, etc. would say if you asked them "*How am I doing?*" Would the answer be the same if *someone else* asked them how you are doing? Do you *really* know what they would say, or do you just *think* you know the answer?

The only objection you can never overcome is the one that you don't know about.

- You don't hear about a new position that becomes available, because the person making the decision isn't aware of the great results you have achieved, and has a wrong impression of your abilities.
- You are passed over for a promotion because the decision maker assumes you don't have certain critical skills or qualities.
- You aren't offered an exciting new project because your boss has no idea you are interest-

ed in getting involved in that area, and assumes you are already too busy.

- You never get called for a job interview because you aren't aware of negative vibes you send out.

Have you ever met someone at a networking event, and within a few minutes of conversation concluded that you would have to be very careful about whom you would introduce them to, for fear they would "burn" your own connections? Have you ever read a posting or an email to a group you belong to that revealed attitudes that made you cringe? And have you thought, "*I'm glad I'm not like that!*"?

We all have our blind sides. The only way to overcome those is to seek out critical feedback, painful though it might be. And "critical" feedback is the most useful kind!

If you ask "*How am I doing?*" and the answer is "*Great,*" you may feel good, but it doesn't give you insight into areas where you might improve. And often you may get a "*Fine*" that doesn't really mean you're doing fine. After all, friends are sensitive to your feelings. Co-workers are reluctant to be too critical, because they don't want to impair your working relationship. Subordinates are afraid you might take it out on them in other ways. Networking contacts don't want to get into an awkward discussion. And so on.

This suggests that if you want true, substantive feedback, you need to do a little work yourself to get it. You need to show that you really want the unvarnished truth, and that you won't get angry about it. You need to probe a bit yourself. Instead of asking questions that make it easy to give a non-committal positive response, ask those that invite serious input, like: "*What's one thing I could do better?*"

Once you start getting some feedback, probe it further. Get really curious about what you are hearing. Don't agree or disagree, or attempt to convince the

other party why you are really better than they think. Nothing will stop the flow of honest feedback more quickly than an attempt to defend yourself! You can always schedule another time to show what you've done based on their feedback, or what you've realized they might not know, *after* you've shown that you've really heard them and given it some thought.

What does it mean to get really curious? Ask additional questions and dig deep into the feedback you're receiving, like:

- How has that shown up in my work?
- What factors or events have led you to that conclusion?
- What specific examples can you give me?
- How else have you seen that affect my performance?
- What effect do you think that has had on others?
- Can you suggest another way I might approach that?

Now I'm not suggesting you need to accept all of the criticisms you might hear *carte blanche*! After all, what you are hearing is one person's opinion, or what they have seen from one vantage point. Just be careful not to *evaluate* the input until you've listened very carefully and gotten all of the detail you can.

Seeking this type of feedback can be particularly disarming with a boss, if done at the right time. The wrong time is during or soon before a performance appraisal. The right time is early to mid-way through the appraisal period, when there's plenty of time left to change your behavior, and your boss's perception of your performance.

Finally, be sure to thank people for their honest feedback. Sincerely. Remember that just as you are making yourself vulnerable by inviting criticism, they are putting themselves on the line by providing it. Once you've had time to think deeply about the



input they've given you, get back to them to let them know what you are going to do differently. Let them see that you've really taken it to heart, and that it was worth the risk of telling you what they truly thought. Use that to create a feedback loop that can help you achieve continuous improvement. ●

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