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Improving Employee Feedback:
Four Practices

By Brian Pauley

I t is time to set the record straight about something that plagues too many leader-employee relationships: the lack of regular, effective feedback.

Ask any employee if they have regular performance dialogue with their leader. Sometimes you actually find someone who says yes. If that is you, consider yourself lucky. For most people, it simply doesn't happen. As an astute reader of *The Stepping Stone*, you know better so you probably do a decent job here. But, like any worthwhile pursuit, we can always improve.

One could write a book on this topic. Many have. My focus here is on four, go-to practices for becoming more effective at feedback. Like almost every single topic in management and leadership, it sounds simple and easy to do. But, if that were the case, everyone would be doing it, right? Exactly. Thus, the actual application of it is difficult.

#1: MAKE FEEDBACK A PART OF YOUR REGULAR, ONGOING DIALOGUE

Feedback is a discipline that should be part of the regular dialogue you have with employees. Too often, it is saved for major milestones or moments—such as overly festered problems or an annual performance review. By then, there is so much information built up, you have to do a ton of planning, and it flat out feels weird for everyone involved. Plus, dump truck feedback (too much at once) never feels good.

To establish this as a discipline in your leadership, practice and implement the following in your *regular conversations* with those you lead:

- *Ensure you have a relationship with the person.*
  If the conversation feels awkward, it will not be very effective.
- *Provide feedback immediately.*
  Recently, a friend of mine found out about a series of issues eight months later. That is way too long. It is hard to correct a problem you can barely remember.

- *Provide it in person as much as possible.*

In person is always best, but not always practical. However, there is one rule to follow here: Negative messages must be on the phone or in person. Always. Email or texts can be misunderstood, and they make it difficult to ask questions and have dialogue.

- *Be specific.*
  When it comes to feedback, specific is always better. For example, if someone did a great job on a task, tell them why so they learn from it and replicate it going forward. Don't just say *"Great job!"*—Say, *"Great job! Your extra effort really showed through on being prepared for the presentation. The customer noticed and chose us!"* See the difference? The first just makes you feel good. The second makes you feel just as good and has the added benefit of letting you know what to replicate.

- *Always offer your help and support.*
  The goal of the discussion is to improve performance. Whether or not you like or agree with the statement, you as the leader are responsible for everyone's performance. Therefore, offer to help and support in whatever way you can.

The discipline of providing feedback as part of your regular dialogue also goes along nicely with how the brain naturally works. In the book *Boundaries for Leaders*, Dr. Henry Cloud talks about how the human brain relies on three essential processes: attention, inhibition and working memory. He states, *"You must lead in a way that ensures your own energy and your people's energy will be spent on what is important and on what drives results, while limiting and inhibiting distractions, intrusions, and toxins."* Regular feedback allows you to lead this way.

#2: ALWAYS GET PERMISSION FIRST

In the November issue of *The Stepping Stone*,[1] I wrote about the practice of getting permission in conversations. It sounds simple (and it is), but

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this practice has made a huge difference for me in my interactions with people. If you are going to give feedback, positive or negative, establish permission first. Such conversations can be emotionally charged, so the probability of a successful conversation goes up dramatically if you establish permission. The particular time you choose to walk up and ask someone to talk may not be a good time for them. Something like this goes a long way:

> *"Hey Adam, I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes and give you some feedback on your project. Things were a little bumpy, so this may take 30 minutes or so. Would now be a good time to chat about it?"*

The bottom line: respect the person's boundaries and get permission.

And, one more thing: If you are setting up a formal discussion to give some feedback, don't do it in such a way that the person agonizes over it for weeks. This is especially true if you are a high-ranking person in the office. A meeting invite from the VP titled "Discussion" has "Trip to the Principal's Office" written all over it—even if it is intended to be a positive meeting. In the absence of specific information, people tend to assume the negative. It is human nature.

#3: REPLACE STATEMENTS WITH GOOD QUESTIONS

When providing feedback, our tendency is to give information, to talk about our observations, and perhaps to offer advice and suggestions. Those aren't bad things. And, they may be necessary. However, in and of themselves, they are lacking.

Providing feedback is the perfect opportunity to inject good questions into a situation. Questions are a secret weapon many leaders don't utilize enough in feedback situations. Marilee Adams, in her book *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life,* says *"Questions drive results."* And driving results is precisely why we have these conversations. We want others to reach their potential while delivering for the business. Asking good questions helps to maximize the opportunity on the table. Here are some reasons:

- You lower the chance of defensiveness in a negative situation.

- You invite recipients to develop their own insights and solutions, which are always preferable to yours. Remember, how you would have solved the problem may not work for the other person.

- You might be wrong. Asking questions opens the door to other perspectives and interpretations. As leadership expert John Maxwell says *"we see the world not as it is, but as we are."*

Notice that I said "good questions" in the beginning of this section. Don't go down the path of asking bad questions. Contrast the following:

> *"Why are your reports always late?"* (bad question)

> *"How can we work together to ensure these reports are completed on time?"* (good question!)

Approach the situation positively, give the other person the benefit of the doubt, and make feedback a partnership by asking good questions.

#4: REMOVE THE FEEDBACK SANDWICH FROM THE MENU

Many of you probably know what I mean by "feedback sandwich." For those who don't, it is the technique of saying something positive, then negative, and finishing the conversation with a positive. Here is an example:

"You are doing a good job. But, I need you to work on your communication style. It is very abrasive. I know you can turn this around."

While it may make *you* feel better, this kind of delivery leaves the recipient feeling quite lousy. Positives and negatives don't quite cancel each other out in the world of feedback. It can leave today's knowledge worker (i.e., person hired for his/her brain) feeling insulted and deflated. In his article titled "*Why I Hate the 'Sandwich' Technique for Delivering Feedback,*" author and leadership coach Art Petty offers this to leaders, *"Consider this some robust feedback: quit sugarcoating your performance discussions. Your associates will respect you more for your clarity and your support of their development. It's time to grow up and lead."* Point taken.

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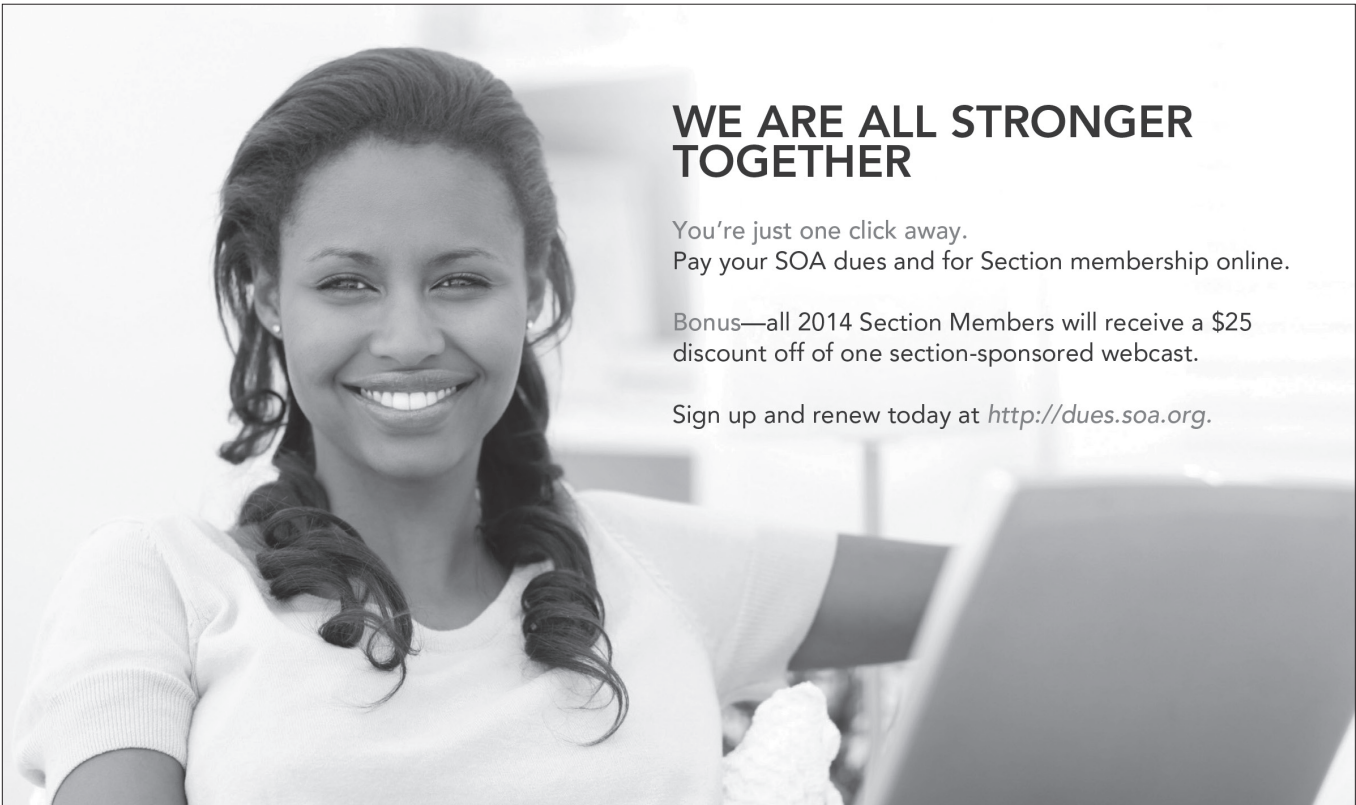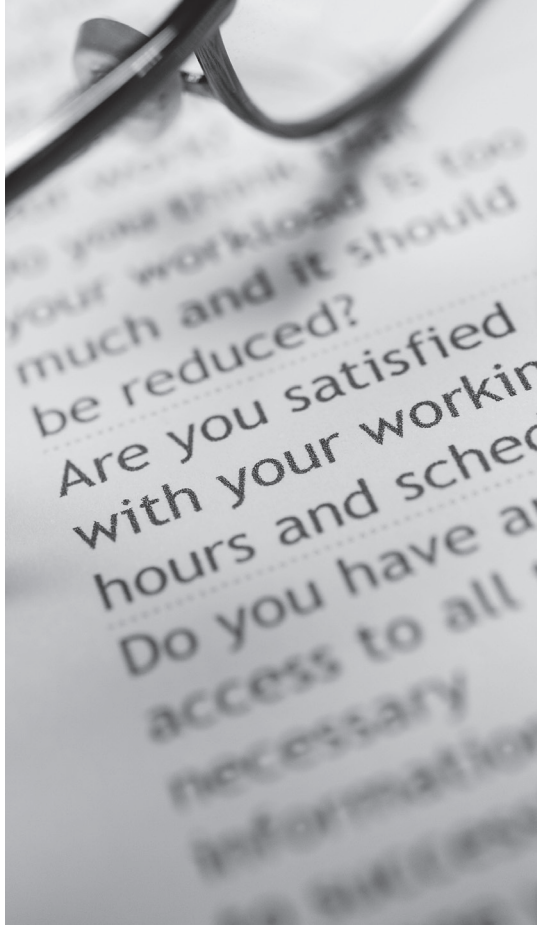
Most employees are not satisfied with the amount of feedback they receive; and for what they do receive, don't find it very helpful. By implementing the above practices into your feedback dialogue, I believe you will build better relationships, increase job performance, and deliver better for your organization.

Culture expert Chris Edmonds says that everything a leader does either helps or hinders relationships with employees. There is no in-between. Put these practices into place and make the feedback process a positive, not a negative, experience —even for the tough conversations. ●

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ENDNOTE

[1] "Becoming a Quiet (Actuarial) Leader."