This Former High-School Teacher Emphasizes the Importance of Establishing Multiple Feedback Channels, Even Remotely

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For many companies, the end of the year means performance reviews. Like other interactions these days, many of these reviews will be done via video call. While a computer screen can make giving feedback feel awkward, it's critical for employees' learning and development. So, with that in mind, how can we be effective at giving feedback when remote, not only during performance reviews, but all the time?

To stretch and strengthen your feedback muscle and build a culture of productive feeback in your workplace, here are several best practices leaders and managers can apply, even as many employees continue working remotely.

1. Focus first on psychological safety

It's impossible to give feedback effectively if employees don't feel respected, included and comfortable at work. To ensure employees trust that feedback is coming from a place of support, it's essential to build a foundation of psychological

safety, in which employees know they won't be disciplined or embarrassed when openly sharing concerns, ideas, mistakes or asking questions. Furthermore, it's essential to establish an environment in which diversity is not only tolerated, but welcomed. In addition to making a company a more enjoyable place to work, this type of environment leads to increased engagement, innovation, higher productivity and lower turnover.

Building psychological safety on your team doesn't happen overnight, but it's essential to building a feedback culture. One way to make sure individuals feel safe is to talk about mistakes and failures openly and regularly and frame them as learnings.

Related: How to Make Negative Feedback Work For You

2. Make feedback an everyday practice

For many people, it's not natural to give and solicit feedback – it can feel uncomfortable. But it's really only uncomfortable if feedback is seen as critical or judgemental. When feedback only happens a few times a year, such as in a formal review, it can cause a lot of anxiety. That's why I prefer to frame feedback as fuel, where frequent feedback is an essential part of the everyday way we do our jobs and work together as a team.

When it comes to formal reviews, I tell managers on my team that if a formal review is the first time an employee is hearing feedback, then they're not doing it right. No formal review should include any surprises. Instead, feedback should be an integral part of their weekly or bi-weekly one-on-one conversations. The formal review is instead a time to talk about patterns, themes, growth and opportunities.

It’s important to lay the groundwork for this approach by teaching managers and employees why they’re being given feedback, how to ask for feedback, and how to give good feedback so that conversations are constructive. Sharing is caring — as educator Randy Pausch wrote for *Entrepreneur*, “When you’re screwing up and nobody says anything to you anymore, that means they’ve given up on you … your critics are often the ones telling you they still love you and care about you and want to make you better.”

3. Flip the dynamic

Less interaction while working remotely means there’s less feedback, so it’s important to give more, but also to intentionally seek it from others. Feedback doesn’t always have to be initiated from the top down. Actively seeking feedback from the team or manager, even before a project starts, reduces pressure and potential for defensiveness. It also creates a space where giving and receiving feedback becomes part of how everyone on your team operates, instead of something the boss passes down.

4. Set the stage

A culture of feedback doesn’t just happen. It requires commitment and effort by the team and regular conversations about how the practice of feedback supports the work. Discuss what feedback should look like for your team — maybe share feelings about feedback, recounting both negative and positive experiences to identify some do’s and don’ts of giving feedback.

Also, work with your team to find ways to keep feedback flowing during work from home. Managers can help encourage feedback conversations by regularly reminding employees, “Have you asked the team for feedback?” and “Where have you built in the feedback loops?”

Related: Ask These 7 Questions to Get the Honest Feedback You Need

5. Catch someone doing something right

I started my career as a high school teacher. When I was grading student work, I sometimes felt pressure to find all of the mistakes and help them correct it. Instead, I actually found it to be much more effective and engaging for my students when I also acknowledged all of the times they got something right.

This approach also applies to giving feedback in the workplace. It shouldn't only happen when someone does something wrong – we need to give positive feedback too. However, feedback should be more nuanced than a binary of positive and constructive. There actually are 10 different types of positive and constructive feedback, including recognition, encouragement, maintenance, adjustment and inclusion. It's important to find a balance. And when it comes to positive feedback, it's not just saying, "great job, keep it up!" and moving on. There's an opportunity to discuss learnings and next steps even when you achieve success. Using a specific construct, such as the situation-behavior-impact (SBI) model can be helpful, serving as a reminder to discuss impact as well as how to build on learnings and successes.

6. Keep the feedback flowing

Healthy relationships always need tending. While you may have had great team rapport while working together at the office, there's a chance that some of that has eroded while working from home.

Do some reflection. Check in with the team. Build in additional structure to encourage consistent give and take of

feedback. Regular feedback means more engaged employees and less stress – particularly during review time – and that’s something we all could benefit from right now.

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