



Feedback is good for your health

By Deborah Grayson Riegel | June 1, 2016

“Feedback is the breakfast of champions,” wrote Ken Blanchard, leadership expert and author of “The One Minute Manager.” In other words, feedback is an essential ingredient that helps leaders and teams develop their energy and resources so they can perform better, be more strategic, build healthier relationships, and contribute to the bottom line.

And like breakfast, feedback — when done right — delivers both physical and emotional benefits.

Nevertheless, many people skip a healthy breakfast, just like many leaders skip out on giving feedback, and their colleagues skip asking for it. In his journal article “Constructive Performance Appraisal Feedback for Healthcare Employees,” Kent V. Rondeau reports that both health care leaders and their employees dislike performance evaluations. Leaders don’t want to feel like “appraisers” of others’ work. Their colleagues often feel as if their work isn’t being accurately appraised. This, Rondeau writes, results in a perceived power struggle rather than a productive conversation.



Of course, health care leaders aren’t alone. A 2009 Gallup study of over 1,000 U.S.-based employees shows that managers who give little or no feedback to their workers fail to engage 98 percent of them. It’s no surprise that disengaged workers are less efficient, have higher rates of absenteeism, and suffer lower rates of productivity. Despite this overwhelmingly negative impact, leaders who find it difficult to create a feedback-rich culture usually opt out instead of learning how to make feedback more palatable and positive for all parties.

Hand washing can feel tedious and flu shots can be unpleasant, but we adhere to both practices because the impact is so overwhelmingly positive. Similarly, creating a culture where feedback can thrive should be non-negotiable when it comes to growing healthier leaders, teams, and organizations.

The benefits of feedback aren’t reserved just for the business and professional realms. Based on his research, Dr. Kenneth Nowack reported in *Envisia Learning/TD Magazine* that the mental and physical benefits of working in a feedback-rich culture include:

- Enhanced immunity
- Decreased burnout
- Decreased depression
- Enhanced job satisfaction

- Less physical illness over one's lifespan
- Greater longevity

Why? Because feedback means that people notice and care about the person and their contributions. When leaders work in systems where their actions matter to others, they feel more fulfilled, engaged, and healthy overall.

Nevertheless, negative feedback can often feel like social rejection – and that can hurt. Studies conducted by C. Nathan DeWall from the University of Kentucky show that social rejection can cause real pain.

So feedback needs to be delivered in a way that minimizes hurt feelings and maximizes engagement, improves performance, and realizes the associated personal health benefits.

According to “The role of gender in the construction and evaluation of feedback effectiveness” in Management Communication Quarterly, the way to maximize the personal, professional, and organizational health benefits of feedback is to create a culture where feedback conversations are focused on the task and task-related behavior, not the person or personality.

Feedback such as, “Your paperwork frequently has calculation errors. You need to take your time filling it out and then double-check your work,” may sound harsh, but it still promotes health benefits, because this feedback is task-focused. In contrast, feedback such as, “You're careless and impulsive, and this shows up in your paperwork,” is less effective – and possibly even detrimental, in terms of personal health – because this is clearly commentary on the recipient's personality.

When feedback addresses relevant tasks, not the person's character, it promotes health benefits to leaders, teams, and organizations.

Creating a healthy feedback culture isn't just the leader's job. It's the team's job as well, especially in the face of complex work that requires collaboration. In “The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right,” Atul Gawande MD writes that “medicine's traditional answer for how professionals should cope with complexity is through training and technology. But we also need the humility to acknowledge that we as individuals will

fail at our tasks no matter how smart or experienced we are...And we need to understand that our colleagues, no matter their station or experience, are key assets for helping us maintain vigilance and caring, identify problems, and solve them.”

This can mean being brave enough to give feedback to colleagues at any level of the organization, as well as being open to receiving feedback from them.

Feedback, like a healthy breakfast, shouldn't be an occasional event, let alone a once-a-year occurrence (like most organizations' annual performance reviews). Instead, feedback should be exchanged frequently. Leaders and team members need to know how their work is progressing against expectations, make timely course corrections, energize and educate each other, and celebrate successes along the way.

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