

In Search of Feedback



by Merna Skinner

MANY SENIOR executives struggle with the question, "How am I really doing?" Most executives have the discipline and initiative to set their own goals and gauge their performance. These leaders can show the overall business results that they and their subordinates have achieved by citing revenues, returns on investment, and other data. But on a qualitative level, how can these people know both how they are performing and how they are perceived?

How a senior manager leads, motivates, and interacts with staff and communicates with external audiences is not always easy to assess. Politically, it is awkward for subordinates or peers to tell this person what they really think about the executive's behaviors or performance.

Many firms started using 360-degree feedback instruments to management style and behaviors. Unfortunately, such questionnaires only show which skills need the most attention. They rarely provide either anecdotal or qualitative information. Most co-workers fear that the language they use or specific critical incidents they cite will reveal their identity and put their own careers at risk.

So how does this senior leader get honest and constructive feedback?

The solution to this dilemma often lies in hiring an outside coach who can objectively and confidentially assess the executive's behavior, suggest improvements, and guide them in mastering new behaviors.

The benefits of one-on-one professional development are quickly realized. In a series of focused sessions, executives can truly "see themselves as others see them." Typically, they are videotaped in real-life business situations with the coach playing various roles. Later, they view the tape and, with the coach, draw their own conclu-

sions as to what needs the most work.

Seeing their behaviors on tape is an illuminating experience. The "ah ha" occurs when they realize how, for instance, their brusqueness or lack of eye contact or sarcastic tone impacts others. A good coach will help the executive prioritize one or two behaviors that need work and then develop a follow-up program. Between sessions, the executive can practice new behaviors before reporting the results.

Dealing with external audiences is another area where senior executives can benefit from one-on-one professional development. Whether they are



addressing shareholders, a board of directors or other senior industry colleagues, how they communicate is crucial. Most people at this level have excellent command of presentation content, but they aren't necessarily as polished, persuasive, and personal when it comes to actual performance.

Many executives often find themselves rising quickly to senior posts where they suddenly are responsible for managing larger staffs. While they may be technically proficient, many are not as skilled in adjusting to different subordinate work styles. For example, when the youngest senior vice president of an insurance company was promoted to the presidency of a large business unit, he thrived on precision, structure, and regimentation. His approach to work was based on the focused and efficient completion of tasks—without much regard for the people who were accomplishing them.

Everyone who dealt with him found his manner distant, stern, and inflexible.

In viewing the tape during a coaching session, he realized that his rigidity made him come across as cold and uncaring. In a conference that was designed as informal and interactive, he was not conversational and made other participants feel uncomfortable by his formality. In coaching, he realized that much of his behavior had been learned at an early age. He was raised by a military father. The verbal behavior he developed was all centered on protecting himself and making sure that he "fit in." This way of communicating had served him well during his earlier career and was reinforced through continual promotions. At this career juncture, however, he could not afford to ignore the negative effects that his behavior was having on the company.

This young president was trained to be more engaging while speaking. He learned to speak softer, to use more facial expressions and gestures, to be looser in communication style, and more confident in his ability to carve out a distinct personality. Rather than feeling obliged to act in the role of what a president "should be," he learned to engage his fellow workers on a more individual level. He also learned to "read" people's styles better and flex more in their direction, not always uniformly acting in an autocratic mode.

Senior executives face a tough challenge when it comes to getting quality feedback. Receiving such information in a timely, productive, specific, and actionable manner is often best done using an executive coach. Not as clinical as therapist nor as remedial as a counselor, this professional can guide the senior executive to realizing what in their professional presence, demeanor, and style needs improvement to better lead, manage, and motivate.

For senior managers, pausing to better understand how others see them, improves how they perform—both internally with their employees and externally with shareholders, boards of directors, and the press. EE

ACTION: How might you best give and receive constructive feedback?

RESOURCES: Read Dianna Booher's Need for Feedback and Joe Folkman's Turning Feedback into Change.