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# Feedback or Feel Bad?

The last time I drove the missus to town for our regular weekly shopping trip I actually counted the number of road signs that I saw on my side of the road between my house to the wet market. Admittedly there were a few that I had never noticed before this despite having plied that route countless times since we moved into the neighbourhood in January 2009. This is not an admission that I have been running through stop signs with impunity and endangering precious lives while pretending to be the Mr Magoo of Bangi but I have realized that if I had driven slower and paid enough attention to the road signs, I am convinced that my journey would be more pleasant for everybody especially the occupants of the car and kinder to the aging jalopy. The signs were put up for a purpose, which is to inform, to warn and also to educate.

Feedback to me is the breakfast of champions. At home it tells me if I am giving enough attention to my daughter's schooling, it provides a pretty timely indication if I have been less than disciplined in observing my diet or even if the tie matches the shirt! At work it is even more critical. It tells us many things. It is a gauge that measures our performance and it can also mirror our behaviours quite reliably. Just like the environment at home, the challenge is to position ourselves, or to create that very critical personal branding that says, "I welcome your feedback". So how do we create this positioning?

First of all there must be a strong enough relationship with our colleagues. This is maybe stating the obvious to some since no stranger is going to walk up to us and proceed with giving us feedback on our performance. However I feel it cannot be overstated because in my work I have come across too many leaders who fail to do this. They may be too busy with their daily tasks that they fail to focus on creating and nurturing relationships with their people yet at most meetings or townhall gatherings staff are expected to share thoughts and feedback! If the staff needs to be reminded, to be coaxed and cajoled for feedback then the culture of openness is not yet there. It is up to the leader to set the tone of the organization. If the leader is seen to be generous with his feedback then it follows that the staff too will learn to be easy with their feedback. It is a good idea to begin by sharing positive feedback a few times to make people accustomed to the idea of giving and receiving feedback.

Once there is a comfort level amongst staff with regards to feedback sharing, quickly find opportunities to ask permission from staff if he or she can be given a feedback for improvement. The staff identified at this point must be one who is open and comfortable enough to receive such feedback. The positive experience of the conversation may be used to showcase the benefits of sharing feedback. Throughout this time the leader too must find opportunities to ask for feedback from staff about his own performance. One will be amazed at the results.

To maximize the effectiveness of feedback shared there must be a set of criteria observed. The easiest of these is timeliness. Timeliness ensures that the receiver is given the information about her performance as soon as possible. This also allows her to benefit from it quickly without having to wait until the next time she has a discussion with the leader before she is given the feedback. This is even more imperative if the feedback is one for behavioural improvement. It would be quite damaging both to the person and to the organization if the person continues to project the wrong behaviours any longer than necessary.

The second criterion is being specific. This perhaps poses a greater challenge to Malaysians generally especially since we are so accustomed to our meaningless "interesting la", "can la" or what, to me, is the single most disturbing of all : "boleh la" replete with the all too famous non committal tone that usually accompanies it. Being Malaysians we were not trained to be direct, in fact we are made to believe that being less than direct is actually a virtue in certain situations. However, in helping a colleague or a subordinate understand with clarity how and which part of her performance needs improving, the feedback giver must be as specific as possible. She needs to know what was the behaviour observed, its impact on the observer, and, if it is a feedback for improvement, a suggested alternative for her future reference as well. I have observed that keeping the impact limited to the observer helps in keeping the interaction focussed. There is no issue about how "others" might be impacted because the giver has made it clear that he is sharing how he himself felt about it. And I have also noticed that following a conversation such as this, the staff will make an effort to seek feedback from others about her performance, starting with people she is most comfortable with and perhaps, even from those she does not yet consider to be her close friends.

The third and last criterion is ensuring that the feedback given is balanced between the positive and the negative or between the ones for recognition and improvement. This is not to say that for each recognition feedback there must also be a feedback of the improvement variety to follow suit. Or vice versa. This is not about keeping tabs of the types of feedback given either. Instead it is about the state of mind of the giver. He must always find the windows of opportunity to share feedback of both types as and when they present themselves. To always be observant about the performance of the team because negative behaviours if left unchecked would wreak untold damages to the performance and image of the organization. On the other hand, great performance left unrecognized long enough will somehow fizzle out or fall through the cracks.

Leaders should always be aware that the main objective of sharing feedback is to prevent the wrong behaviours from being repeated and to nurture an environment which promotes the right behaviours being practiced until they become part of the organizational culture. So the question is, are we doing enough to promote this culture?