



STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP GMBH

CREATING A PERFORMANCE ENHANCING FEEDBACK CULTURE
ON YOUR TEAM
A LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

WHITE PAPER



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A LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

CREATING A PERFORMANCE ENHANCING FEEDBACK CULTURE ON YOUR TEAM

In virtually every company that I have worked as a trainer and coach, people at some point talk about the importance of openness and trust in a company culture. In pretty much the same instance, most mention how they could do with more of it in their own organization. This article outlines a step-by-step leadership plan on how you can create a team culture of openness and trust on your team and use it to drive performance by providing each other with valuable feedback.

BEING THE BEST VERSION OF YOU

The leadership qualities you'll need to display for this to work are simple but not always easy. You will have to be courageous about trying a new approach with your people, honest about the true purpose behind this idea, open about your possible shortcomings as you develop the necessary skills to make this a successful experiment, as well as humble and compassionate in all your dealings with your team members.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Before we jump to the steps themselves, let's take a look at some factors that will likely influence your project. Firstly, there are the big learning inhibitors: fears, ego defences, complacency and arrogance. If your team is like most, it is likely to contain some of these factors. If not, you should consider yourself incredibly lucky! Secondly, there are the sceptics and naysayers around your team that will fuel some of the big learning inhibitors within your team. Thirdly, there may be a powerful role model or two in the immediate vicinity (next department) that are the opposite of the leader you are trying to be. Being reminded of their mere existence can be demotivating for both you and your team members.

Furthermore, I realize that team compositions do not always enable a smooth transition towards the type of culture you are aiming for. Like me in my first management job, you might be the youngest on your team, or at least have some team members who are older than you. Those might be asking themselves why they should want to be part of a feedback loop with you? On your team you might also have people who have felt short changed by the organization or by previous managers and have become sceptical and distrusting. Or you might have ambitious and well-educated people on your team who feel they should have gotten your job. Or you have known gossipers on your team who no one trusts. Or, or, or.



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The bottom line is that all of the above can be solved, although, all of the above together can certainly be extremely intimidating to deal with, especially in the midst of normal business complexity and challenging deadlines.

Yet, it is all worth it. A hundred fold worth it – at least. So, lets get started then!

CLARIFYING YOUR INTENTION

Before you even briefly outline this idea to a colleague in the company canteen, please ask yourself the following questions: What is the real reason why I want to establish a culture of openness and trustful feedback giving on my team? Is it a purely ego driven agenda to reach a bonus target or achieve a promotion? Or, is it at least partly driven by a desire to provide your team members with valuable information for their individual growth? Please be honest here. If your interest is only personal and you have little desire to be of service to your team members, then you should stop reading now. This is not the right exercise for you.

On the other hand, if you are genuinely motivated by the thought of positively impacting the lives of the people on your team, continue by asking yourself this question: Why might my team members possibly want to be part a team that is trusting enough to give each other plenty of open and honest feedback? What is in it for the organization if we become such a team?

The key question that summarizes the drive needed behind a project like this one is: In which way would such a culture serve all the key stakeholder groups? Unless you have worked out convincing value-adds for everyone in your head, it's not worth starting this project.

SETTING THE SCENE

Assuming your intention is to be of service to all stakeholders, its time to call a team meeting. (Ideally, the team meets at a location outside the office facilities.) In this meeting, tell your team about your desire to establish a culture of openness and trust, where people regularly provide each other with constructive feedback. Be honest about your true intention and assure them that you really mean well for all stakeholders. Then ask for their thoughts on how something like this could be established ... and be sure to mention that you yourself would appreciate regular feedback from them on your performance as their manager. You may have to be patient here, as this may be quite an unusual approach for them. In this meeting, probe with them various ways to establish openness and trust, and then move to discussing the typical topics that "we as a team" should be giving each other feedback on. Once things are flowing a bit, ask how often they would like this to happen (Do not settle for less than once a quarter. In the beginning it might be best to start with a rhythm of once a month.) When it comes to deciding on the next steps, tell them that you will set up one-on-one-meetings with each of them to discuss the matter further in a private and confidential setting. The motivation behind this is to allow people to continue the discussion on this important topic in an environment where they may feel more comfortable about opening up on important matters.



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ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION OF TRUST

In the first one on one meetings, you may want to ask each person what they would like more openness on in your department in general and then tell them honestly if that is something you can commit to providing. If matters are out of your sphere of influence, then simply admit that. If you can provide what they ask for, do it as promptly as possible. Remember that there is no room for your ego in a meeting that is about establishing trust. Moving to the topic of feedback, starting with a general description of the type of feedback you would like to receive from them in the future (e.g. on what topics), generally is a good idea. Explaining how that feedback could be valuable to your growth as their manager helps them scope your true intention. Again, if you sense a feeling of resistance rising inside you as you envision yourself admitting that you could use some feedback, ask yourself if this could be an ego driven resistance. There is no room for ego in this type of work.

Before ending the meeting, ask your people to come prepared with feedback on your performance as a manager to the next private meeting. Ask for one positive point and one improvement point only, as everyone is easing their way into this way of helping each other to grow and perform. Of course, if you feel comfortable with your team members, only one private meeting will be needed to get to the point where both sides provide each other with feedback.

GAINING CREDIBILITY AND MOMENTUM

In a team meeting, show the team all the points you have received on your performance as a manager and discuss with them in more detail if needed, in order to fully understand how the team sees the “should be”. Consider asking the team to prioritize the positive points and the improvement points in order of importance to them. By doing this you are demonstrating both openness and humbleness, not to mention demonstrating a willingness to trust your team with information that some people might see as a “weakness” in you. Finally, and most importantly, by doing this you are demonstrating the courage required to develop a truly open and trusting culture. You are being the change you want to see on your team (to borrow part of a phrase from the highly inspirational Mahatma Gandhi). In this context, a true story I can share with you is one of a very successful CEO of a global media company that I used to coach many years ago. Being amazed with his openness towards his team of direct reports at the time, I asked him if he was not afraid that someone would use the information against him. He looked me straight in the eyes and was quick to reply: Thor, if I share this type of information with 10 people, one of them might admittedly let me down somewhere along the road. The other 9 however I know from experience will grow very close to me because of the trust I show them. Their loyalty and support, to me far outweigh the potential damage that the one person who let me down can do to me and I am more than happy to live with this risk.



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Before ending the meeting, make sure you tell them which topics you will start working on and be honest about the way you see the developmental challenge. If you feel you might benefit from their help, do not hesitate to ask for it. Be careful though, not to transfer the responsibility of your development back to them. You need to be sure what you are committing yourself to and clear on the fact that your development responsibility lies with you and you alone. If the topic is one where they need to develop as well, in order to meet you half way (e.g. they feel you dominate meetings too much and you feel that they should simply speak up more in meetings), then do not be afraid to voice your opinion on that.

STARTING A PERIOD OF GROWTH

In preparation of the next round of one on one meetings let all team members know that they can bring more feedback to you, especially on your progress/or lack thereof, on the points that they already gave to you. Then, let them know that you will be providing feedback on them as well this time. In this regard, experience shows that preparing a point that is not too “big”, but rather something they can rather easily take on board and fix is important here. This results in them thinking “Oh, that ‘feedback thing’ with the boss wasn’t that bad after all.” Also, it enables them to gain positive momentum by building on the feedback you gave them.

In this meeting, make sure that they first give you feedback. In the beginning it is simply important that the manager be the first to demonstrate willingness to fully engage with the process. As you then do provide them with your feedback, consider using the following steps:

1. “Is it ok with you that I now give you my feedback?” (By asking for permission, just after having received feedback from them, they commit to switching gears and become mentally ready to receive information.)
2. “Something positive I noticed lately is ...” (Then provide evidence for your praise.)
3. “Now, on the improvement side, I noticed the other day as you were...” (Start by describing an incident that “sets up” the thing to be improved. This allows them to understand the context of how you saw things – which makes the improvement point easier to accept.)
4. Ask them how they see the improvement point you just made and make sure it is an open question.
5. Ask them how they would like to approach the matter of improving in this area. (Or ask them to think about it and let you know in a few days.)
6. Ask them if you can support them directly in their efforts, or if you can somehow help them secure the right support for their development.
7. Thank them for the openness and willingness to engage in a feedback process.





THOR OLAFSSON

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ANCHORING THE NEW CULTURE

Once the above steps have become a routine that is repeated at least quarterly (many do it monthly) and you and your team feel it is a valuable action to engage with, consider suggesting peer-feedback as a way of reaching a more advanced This is where you could point out how beneficial it could be for people on the team to give each other feedback instead of just waiting for the "boss" to provide it. After all, truly sharing best practices requires everyone to be involved in the process. Start by asking them what they think of the "feedback" process that is up and running, and what they would think of providing each other with more feedback. Encourage open discussions on this.

As you move forward on the above, I wish you lots of success! But most of all personal growth 😊😊



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"Aware, authentic and purpose driven leaders who are ambitious about developing top performing teams and are equally focused on key performance indicators, will inspire those around them towards excellence."

Thor Olafsson, Founder and Managing Director
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