

To Tell the Truth

Part of my practice as an executive coach is to work with executives/managers who are, to tell the truth, in trouble. Perhaps they aren't managing up well or aren't exhibiting strong strategic skills. Perhaps they are yelling at co-workers. Many of these executives are in their forties and fifties and one of the first things they say to me is, "Why didn't anyone ever tell me that I needed to change before?" My coaching clients are embarrassed to find that, despite their extraordinary efforts on behalf of their companies, they are considered to have major, potentially career-ending flaws. Yes, these skill gaps were mentioned in performance reviews but no leader had a heart to heart, attention-getting conversation about the absolute need to eliminate negative behaviors and replace them with great leadership skills.



I also coach high potential executives in leadership development programs that include verbal and/or online 360 assessments. What type of feedback are they interested in? The *negative* kind. For the most part, the executives search 360 results for gaps, for comments that no one will tell them directly, for action steps they can take. The positive feedback is "nice," but not terribly important to them. How can they achieve success if no one will give them honest feedback?

Think back to when someone gave you feedback that was helpful. What did the person tell you? How did you feel about that person and about yourself? How did it affect your work? When I conduct a verbal 360 interview with a client's boss, I always ask him/her to tell me about a feedback experience in his/her career that would be helpful for my client to hear. Then I ask the boss to share what was learned with my client.

Most of us have a story about a leader who gave us feedback that helped us be more successful. So what stops leaders from providing feedback on a regular basis? Here are some of the usual reasons given for not telling the truth several times during the year:

They should just know what I want done....

They should just step up and take responsibility...

I'm afraid of how they will react...

I'll get to that conversation tomorrow. Today, I have to finish this report, this budget...

They'll never change so it wouldn't make any difference...

I don't want to upset them...

Here's the real story. When we don't give feedback, it's *our* issue. Perhaps we've made assumptions about the motivation of the employee, perhaps we imagine the conversation will be unpleasant, perhaps we don't like conflict, perhaps developing our people is not high on our list of priorities. Our direct reports do not always know what we want done, or when, or how. Some are so focused on getting the work done that they make mistakes in their interpersonal relationships--but no one tells them the truth about what they don't see for themselves. And, yes, some are in the wrong jobs and we need to help them move to positions that will utilize their strengths.

So, here's my challenge to good leaders who want to become great leaders. Think of one direct report who would benefit from your feedback. What one message would make the most difference? How can you give that candid and open message and build self-esteem at the same time? These are the key ingredients:

1. You have to tell the truth.
2. Your colleague has to walk out of your office feeling whole.
3. You have to help your colleague identify a self-development goal and plan which will increase his/her effectiveness.

Once you have answered these questions for yourself, give the feedback. This is just a way to begin to build your feedback skills so it is okay if the conversation is not perfect. You can even tell your colleague that this is what you are working on and ask for their feedback on how the conversation went. In the next newsletter, we'll explore the specific components of these important discussions.

Finally, if someone told you the truth during your career, write him or her a thank you note. They will certainly appreciate your feedback.

-Sharon Dougherty, CEO, [Priority Coaching](#)