

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Upward Feedback ▶ 12/06/12

Give feedback upward? Or not?

Sergei openly admired his boss, Alicia. So he really grabbed my attention the day he asked how he could give her some overdue feedback.

"A lot the time, Alicia will use our staff meetings to think out loud," he told me. "She'll off-handedly mention, 'Oh, we should do some research about that product,' or 'We should get that department involved in this initiative.'

"We're never sure if she's just talking or if she's actually assigning work. Later on, she might ask what happened with that project. If we didn't take action on it, she wonders why we didn't. That can get really awkward! What do we say? 'We didn't know you were serious?'

"But other times, to avoid that very conversation, one of us will put in some hours on whatever it is, just in case. Sometimes it never comes up again. But other times, when she *does* ask about it, we find out that two or more of us have been working on it, but we didn't know because it was all so casual. Either way, it creates a lot of confusion and wasted time."

It sounded like there might be some feedback in there for Alicia. But I wasn't sure. Maybe the group could manage the whole thing themselves.

After we talked a while, we decided there were definitely things the group could do on its own. For instance, they could check with each other. They could even ask Alicia for clarification.

And there might be a legitimate issue Sergei could raise with Alicia.

Framing a learning conversation

I asked Sergei what feedback he wanted to give Alicia.

He said, "I want her to be clear about whether she's just throwing ideas up into the sky or if she expects us to take action."



Great. That identified the *what*—as in, *what* he wanted to tell Alicia. Now I wanted to talk about *how*—as in *how* he would have this conversation.

Giving upward feedback can be a comfortable conversation that flows easily between two trusted colleagues. But it can also be a delicate conversation between two professionals where the power differential can lead to problems.

If talking with your boss is that first, free and easy style, well, great. Lucky you. If, on the other hand, you fall into that second, delicate style, then it'd be wise to approach the upward feedback conversation with thought and planning.

To do that, I told Sergei, he needed to do one all-important thing: Reframe his “feedback” as a learning conversation.

A learning conversation is one you approach with inquiry. You are not the teller.

Sergei wanted to *tell* Alicia to be clearer about her intentions. *Telling* is not a great way to give upward feedback.

A learning conversation—which *is* a great way to give upward feedback—needs three behaviors at a minimum. They are:

- 1 Identify an issue, don't judge a behavior;
- 2 Assume shared responsibility;
- 3 Ask a genuine question.

Here's how each of those break down.

1 Identify an issue, don't judge a behavior

I'd asked Sergei what feedback he wanted to give Alicia. He said that he wanted her to tell the team whether she was throwing ideas in the sky or if she wanted them to take action.

In other words, he wanted to tell her to change her behavior.



I think we ask people to change when we've experienced a behavior repeatedly and judged it lacking in some way. Of course, if you're the boss, you're responsible for the person's performance and their behavior. You're paid to ask people to change their behaviors.

But if you're not the boss, asking your boss to change behavior, for whatever reason, is likely to be an uncomfortable conversation because it sounds as though you've judged the boss's behavior and found it wanting.

So I asked Sergei to stop thinking about Alicia's behavior and, instead, to think about the situation at a much higher level. What was the real issue that had him upset?

Sergei said, "For me, the issue is all this confusion. It costs time and resources. But if I say that to Alicia, isn't it still going to sound like I'm judging her behavior?" Sergei asked. "I mean, it's her behavior that's causing the confusion!"

I actually thought the issue of the team's confusion could serve as a strong foundation for a learning conversation. Sergei's question—would that sound like a judgment of Alicia's behavior?—led us directly to the second of the three elements.

2 Assume shared responsibility

Sergei said the real issue was the group's—and his—confusion.

Since it's his confusion, he has to own some part in it. Even though Alicia may be contributing, it's his experience. He can't pretend Alicia has total control over what he's experiencing. That's not realistic.

So I asked what he could be responsible for.

He said that when he, or anyone, is confused, they could talk with each other and ask her for clarification. He could be responsible for those actions. "That might clear up a lot right away," he said.

"Yes, it might," I agreed. "And there might be some things Alicia can do differently, too."

"Getting to the 'and' is important," I said. "That way you come to the table owning part of the issue. You're not laying it all on Alicia. That's important if you're going to have a learning conversation."



"OK," Sergei said thoughtfully. "I'm offering to do some things differently. I get it. But once I take responsibility for those things, aren't I just going to ask her to make the same changes anyway?" he asked. "Aren't we back where we started?"

"Not if you do number three," I said. "Ask a genuine question."

3 Ask a genuine question

"A genuine question" reflects something you want to know that you don't know already.

I asked Sergei to think about his initial question, the one that asked her to change behavior: "Alicia, when you want us to take action on an idea, could you tell us clearly?"

Is that a learning question? Is that something he doesn't already know? Will it create a learning conversation?

The answer to all three of those questions is, no.

"Could you tell us clearly?" is a close-ended question. It asks for a yes-or-no answer. Learning conversations can't be framed around a [close-ended question](#).

I asked Sergei if he could think of a genuine question he had, an open-ended question, that he didn't know the answer to but would like to hear Alicia talk about.

After we tried many different ideas, he said, "Here's a question I'd like to know the answer to: What would she like us to do when she tosses out one of those ideas?"

A great learning question!

I really liked this question. Not only is it open-ended, it's forward-looking. It doesn't judge her past behavior. And he doesn't know the answer.

Plus, it actually makes the assumption that Alicia *won't* change her behavior. It assumes that there will be a next time when Sergei, or someone in the group, will be confused.

That's a great assumption! It doesn't ask for any change at all!



Not only is this a genuine question, it also satisfies elements one and two: it identifies an issue without judging the behavior, and it assumes shared responsibility (“What do you want us to do?”).

So now he could have a learning conversation about what she thought the group could do at those times.

And, it might, just might, increase Alicia’s awareness of her contribution to the situation. Who knows? She might even decide to do something differently in the future.

That would be a learning conversation for them both!

Critical criteria

Creating a learning conversation requires you to approach the conversation as a learner, with curiosity rather than judgment. You can’t approach it to prove your position or to point out what’s gone wrong.

So the whole idea of “giving upward feedback” is actually a bit of a red herring, isn’t it? Although this Executive Coaching Tip is called “Upward Feedback,” the suggestions here aren’t really about giving feedback in any traditional sense, are they?

Rather the suggestions are that you 1) identify an issue without judging behavior; 2) take responsibility for your part in the issue; and 3) ask a genuine question as a learner.

I confess, this can be tough. By the time most of us consider having these conversations, we’re already pretty frustrated. We have strong opinions about what’s happening and why. As I like to say, we’ve loaded our gun and we feel some urgency to discharge the round we’ve put in the chamber.

It takes [self-awareness and self-management](#) to put the gun down—still fully loaded!—and have a learning conversation instead of firing our round. Resisting the urge to shoot and engage in that conversation instead is a real test of *The Look & Sound of Leadership™*.

For those of you with direct reports, if this time of year is your review cycle, I’d like to remind you about a Tip from last year about delivering [performance reviews](#) that may be helpful.



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