

Leaders must be open to receiving feedback

Leaders must prioritise being receptive to feedback, as it cultivates both growth and efficiency.



सुलभाःपुरुषाराजन्सततंप्रियवादिनः।अप्रियस्यचपथ्यस्यवक्ताश्रोताचदुर्लभः (Valmiki Ramayana, Aranya Kanda) Maricha here counsels Ravana on why it is critical for kings to surround themselves with those who ‘speak truth to power’. Buddha’s Dhammapada also has a similar saying. With all this age-old wisdom too, leaders often do not seem to attach much importance to it.

Reluctance to receive feedback is natural. Corrective feedback tends to shake one’s self-esteem and ego and in extreme cases can lead to distress. In many, the common defence mechanisms of flight, fight, or freeze go up the moment they start getting feedback. Team members perceive these signals and realise that feedback is not welcome. In crushing feedback, not only do leaders fail to encourage a culture of constructive criticism leading to collective growth and efficiency, but as leaders, they are the poorer for it.

It is human nature to overweigh feedback on strengths and ignore it on weaknesses. But it is precisely their blindspots that leaders need to know about and tackle. Ken Blanchard, renowned American author and business consultant says, 'Feedback is the breakfast of champions'. Is that perhaps why mediocre leaders find it difficult to swallow it? This brings us to the point of why not everyone is cut out to be a leader. In a previous job, I had a colleague in a [leadership](#) role who had a ‘victim complex’, which made it hard for him to accept feedback. So, though he was an exceptional techie, he became a poor leader.

How leaders build a non-threatening environment for constructive criticism:

360-degree and well-rounded feedback is only as good as the non-threatening environment, the openness of the receiver, and the sincerity of its purpose. Leaders need to understand that

the feedbacker is at their most vulnerable moment while giving feedback, and the balance of power is always in favour of the leader. If they want people to 'speak truth to power', they too have to open themselves up to such vulnerability where they listen attentively and acknowledge with respect.

Before they decide how to deal with it, wise people pass the feedback they receive through three filters – truth, relationship, and identity. So, they dispassionately try to answer these three questions: Does it feel like the truth? Does the feedbacker have no axe to grind? Does the feedbacker know the facts and what is good for me? If the answer to these three questions is a yes, they value the feedback in gold.

Ninety per cent of the feedback received is likely to be what leaders already know or is of little value. It is the ten per cent that is truly precious. At Tesco, leaders are trained to receive feedback. They are encouraged to use phrases like 'How to', 'Thank you, tell me more', 'What is the one thing you would like me to do differently', etc. When a leader's response starts with a 'but', team members know that the leader is trying to defend and deflect. When a team or member sees [feedback](#) taken well and leading to some improvements, it is also an acknowledgement of their contribution and commitment to work and goes a long way in team-building.

During the most testing time for Britain in World War II, Clementine Churchill wrote a letter to her husband that read (excerpted): 'I am told there is a danger of your being disliked by your colleagues and subordinates because of your rough, sarcastic, and overbearing manner. I cannot bear that those who serve the country and yourself should not love you as well as admire and respect you. Besides, you will not get the best results by irascibility and rudeness. Please forgive your loving, devoted, and watchful, Clemmie.' Clementine must have experienced apprehension and even feared the consequences. Still, she went ahead, and Winston Churchill and the world were better for it.

Some exceptional people are their own Clementine. Journalists who knew LK Advani said that he would listen, be sensitive, reflect, and was always willing to engage and share his point of view. Reflection on feedback received is also a remarkable quality of leaders who, like Advani, believe that a critic is not an enemy.

Leaders need people in their lives who can speak the truth to them. Constructive feedback is meant to hold up a mirror to them and help them function better. Feedback is not a one-way street – leaders cannot be seen as those who appreciate praise but stifle criticism.

Topics: [Leadership Development](#), [Leadership Solutions](#)

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