



How To Ask For Basic Feedback

Have you ever wondered what your team REALLY thought of you? Have you ever wondered what they say about you to their spouses about you after one of their tough days? Have you wondered if other managers wondered this, or do they have their "stuff" so together that they don't worry about this like you do?

Oh, they worry. Trust us.

The thing is, if you ask around, some people (and more than some in HR) will recommend you "do a three-sixty!"

That's when you really SHOULD worry. 360-degree feedback is very powerful, and almost always inappropriate for managers as a way to learn how they're doing. (We spend some time talking about 360 in the cast, as background.)

This cast teaches you a basic, simple, easy, low investment, low (zero) cost, easily repeatable, hard to mess up, gets-better-when-you-repeat it every-once-in-awhile technique for beginning to learn how you're doing as a manager.

In our experience, the 360 is like so many other parts of management - it's a potential solution to a problem or set of problems. It's a mechanism that is easy to understand, easy to communicate. It sounds like, "well, I need to know what everyone thinks about this person, because the boss's viewpoint is inherently biased, so I'll ask a bunch of folks, and of course I'll make it anonymous, to protect everyone, that makes sense, and then, hey, if we really believe in it, and people are important so we'll just tie it to our review process..." So HR orgs and consulting firms sell them as a way to get good feedback. Done right, it can be very effective. But the problem is that it is so easy to do WRONG. There are so many problems with it, we're just going to name three.

1. If an internal organization does it, regardless of the safeguards to guarantee its anonymity, people will assume it

is somehow not anonymous and it is not anonymity you need but the belief in it.

2. If the sample size is too small, managers - despite exhortations not to do so - will endeavor to "figure out who said what" and probably simply overlay existing biases onto the data to make it virtually useless.

3. The most insidious of the bunch most often, managers will relentlessly focus on one small negative comment that an anonymous subordinate felt obligated to make to keep the boss from being a saint and will ruin 5 good habits just to change one ephemeral bad one.

We have a solution that our listeners could use and we're going to be true to our intro - **a basic, simple, easy, low investment, low (zero) cost, easily repeatable, hard to mess up, gets-better-when-you-repeat it every-once-in-awhile technique for beginning to learn how you're doing as a manager.**

And we have only TWO STEPS! For that reason, we're going to call this the Texas Feedback Podcast. (For our international listeners and those of you in Nuuuu Yawk City, Texas is famous for a dance called the two step, almost always performed to Country Music.)

This is so easy to implement and it combines both semi-public asks with private ones, and it includes asking over a period of time as well as on the spot. This process, with just two steps, reaches everyone you're probably going to ever reach looking for candor about what you do well.

One of the appeals of 360 is that it somehow gives "better" information, because it's "anonymous," "facilitated," and usually computerized or graded. But we're still just talking about one person - the manager - and asking the same group of people. A lot of 360 "instruments" provide analysis about the answers they get. They have a way of thinking about management and they ask questions from that framework. So, you get feedback within that framework. For example, "good clarity," or "weak in team building," or "appeals to my creativity." That's nice, but what do you DOOOOOOO with all that stuff?

The feedback is not actionable because it's not BEHAVIOR.

So onto our technique.

- 1. Systematically ask for feedback over a period of 3 months**
- 2. Conduct a Quick and Dirty "Start, Stop and Continue" Exercise at the end of one of your staff meetings**

1. Systematically ask for feedback over a period of 3 months.

You don't need to announce an interest in feedback, you don't need to make it a crusade, you don't need to make it an objective. We've found it goes better if you stick with a simple message week after week for a period. We recommend ending almost every one on one with a simple question, "Anything I can do better, or differently? Anything I need to stop? Happy to hear feedback."

You ask at the end and don't expect answers for the first week. Do NOT ask at the beginning of the one on one or you'll just create 30 minutes of white noise. Ask at the end, almost - ALMOST - in passing. Remember, those are your 15 minutes! The first time, all but the very bold will say, "gosh, I dunno, lemme think about it." If YOU like, you can say, "Hey, send a mail if you want, or share next week." Whatever works.

Do NOT repeat the request at any time for the next week, until the end of the next one on one. If you miss asking in one of your O3s, NO WORRIES.

That's it. It's the regular repetition that will help you get some insights. If you have a truly open relationship with your team, some will come back with details. When accepting feedback, PASS NO JUDGMENT, just be graciously appreciative. Remember, we've said before, BOSS FEEDBACK DOESN'T WORK and you really ARE the boss here.

2. Conduct a Quick and Dirty "Start, Stop and Continue" Exercise at the end of one of your staff meetings.

This is fun, and simple. After your three month period of asking in one on ones (and collecting it whenever they decide to share), it's time to go a step further. Now they're comfortable with the IDEA of boss feedback, as comfortable as you can help them be.

Announce that you're going to take 10 minutes at the end of a team/staff meeting to do a "Start/Stop/Continue" exercise. Post 3 flip chart pages on the wall and put the three words up, one each per page. Explain that this is just a continuation of the feedback you've been asking for. Tell them what each of the charts mean. Then tell them you'll give them 10 minutes (give them 15).

Then have the team "go to the boards" and write down whatever they want on each sheet. If they don't want to rewrite what someone else wrote, they can just put a check by it. (Some people use sticky notes so folks can write at the table and just stick them up.)

Just to be clear, **Start** is stuff you're not doing that they think you ought to, **Stop** is stuff you're doing they wish you'd not, and **Continue** is stuff you're doing they like.

At the end, come back in, read over them, and if you need clarification, ask someone to give some insight. It doesn't have to be the writer, but it can be.

The key to this exercise is being humbly thankful for THEIR EFFORT AND RISK. Leave it with, "Give me some time to go over these, and I'll make some changes."

There is ONE caveat to this. You will lose all this ground and some more if you try to defend what you're doing. Just DON'T.

So, there it is, our Texas Feedback Cast.

Wrap Up

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