



Why Leaders Hold Back on Feedback

You've just come out of a meeting where one of your peers, Carter, has presented to executive leadership. While he was speaking, you saw two of the exec's texting each other from their phones. One of them challenged an assumption Carter made and accused him of distorting the analysis. Carter's response was less than gracious, and he was visibly irritated. He dismissed the concern, and when he moved on, you saw the texting resume. During the discussion, neither executive spoke. Without their engagement, Carter's proposal was going down fast. The meeting ended with a classic request for "more data," but with no next steps or dates. Everyone knew the proposal would be quietly disregarded.

While getting coffee afterwards, Carter walks up and starts complaining about how this particular executive doesn't like him, and puts him down in front of your (mutual) boss. You nod politely, but think to yourself, "That's not what I see." Moreover, you think Carter's reactions to comments often puts people off. You can see him losing influence in meetings. But he's never invited your feedback and doesn't seem especially open to it. As his peer, you know your whole group sometimes suffers because of his behavior.

What do you do? (Not what do you *think* you should do, but what would you *really* do?) In recent interviews with more than 40 leaders, I asked them to talk about when they hold back from giving feedback, and why. Here's what I learned.

WHAT HOLDS LEADERS BACK

More than ninety percent of these leaders affirmed that they do avoid having conversations like this -- where they could offer feedback (maybe even should), but just don't. When asked why, here's what they said, in order of frequency. You may have thought these same things:

- I'm concerned I'd damage the relationship, maybe even offend the other person
- I don't know how to handle their emotional reactions -- yelling, arguing, crying
- I'm not sure what to say so they will 'get the message'
- I don't want them to report me, or even quit, if I give feedback they don't find fair

- I don't have the energy/time to 'get into it' with them, and anyway they've ignored my feedback before

As we talked further, I heard a few things from these leaders that surprised me a bit more:

- They're self-conscious giving feedback when not asked, and fear being judged as arrogant, or accused of 'butting into' someone else's business
- They worry they'll discourage someone or ruin their motivation, especially people who generally do a good job or are a decent peer or friend
- They think they'll face retribution: being bad-mouthed in the organization, getting criticized in return, being excluded from a lucrative opportunity, plum project, or even losing a raise or promotion

WHO ARE THESE LEADERS?

You might think that the leaders I talked with were all young and inexperienced, but that couldn't be further from the truth. These successful leaders have an average of 22 years of work experience, and range from CEOs of early stage companies to EVPs and VPs of well-known national and international firms. They work in fields ranging from consulting and high technology to financial services, health care, pharmaceuticals, and private equity.

WHY OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS?

Reflecting on all the barriers to giving feedback that these leaders identified, it's a wonder any of us ever do it at all! But there are some very good reasons why it is indeed worth the effort to overcome these fears. As I'm sure you know, sharing feedback (well) can help:

1. Build connection and trust with your colleagues
2. Improve teamwork and communication
3. Increase learning from conflict or disagreements
4. Cultivate a culture of openness
5. Contribute to psychological safety, which in turn drives innovation
6. Reduce stress for all involved

Perhaps more than anything else, mastering the art of exchanging feedback will make work a lot more satisfying, and even more fun - and given how much time we spend on our work, this is no laughing matter!

HOW TO OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS?

Through my conversations with these leaders we've identified the four key steps needed to overcome these fears and become a feedback "ninja:"

Feedback Without Fear© -- *The Four Steps*

1. CARE -- This first step involves knowing why you're giving the feedback, what difference you hope it will make and why you care about the intended recipient
2. PREPARE -- Then there are a few things to do that will help your conversation to go well, like assess your relationship, frame your feedback so it promotes learning, and anticipate how your words will sound to the other person, even practicing aloud to hear yourself with fresh ears
3. SHARE -- This is the part that you probably already think about. (At least I hope so!) It includes setting up so the conversation goes well, and having the conversation
4. REPAIR -- The last step helps you avoid damaging the relationship in the first place, as well as using specific skills to fix things when needed.

Working through all four steps has proven powerful. In an early workshop introducing this approach, participants found these steps helped them better size the risk they would take, manage the time and energy they could invest, and use language and framing so recipients heard their feedback quite differently. They even improved their relationships, a real surprise!

If you would like to master these four steps and finally feel comfortable giving the feedback that you *know* you need to give, [click here](#) to learn about a new online learning opportunity I am offering.

About the Author:

Sharon L Richmond is a veteran executive coach and consultant who has, for decades, helped execs become the leaders they want to be and build organizations they are proud of. Besides partnering with clients from Fortune 50 to start-up and mid-market companies, she's taught in leadership and coaching programs at Stanford GSB and the Stanford School of Medicine. Sharon has led Organizational Effectiveness practices at two consulting firms, and launched and led Cisco's first global Change Leadership center of excellence. Want to learn more? Visit <https://richmondassociatesconsulting.com>.