

DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

A 6-Part Structure for Giving Clear and Actionable Feedback

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Robert was the head of an East Coast insurance company. His greatest asset was his large, extroverted personality. He was the classic glad-handing, backslapping, high-energy salesman. His problem was a familiar one, too: a great salesman – even one with charisma – doesn't necessarily make a great leader.

After receiving some 360-degree feedback, we met to discuss the data. He'd received low scores on providing clear goals and direction, indicating a chaotic management style. His challenge, as I saw it, was twofold: he had to change himself and his environment simultaneously – which meant aligning his team's behavior with his own.

In my years of executive coaching and research about behavioral change, I have learned one key lesson, which has near-universal applicability: We do not get better without structure. Structure is a major contributor to successful behavioral change, whether you're trying to change your own behavior, or your team's. When either asking for or providing feedback, structure can make the process a positive encounter for both parties.

I had a simple off-the-shelf structure for Robert that had worked with clients many times before. It took the form of six basic questions he would discuss during a bimonthly (every other month) one-on-one meeting with each of his nine direct reports. The agenda for each meeting was a sheet of paper with the six following questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are you going?
3. What is going well?
4. Where can we improve?
5. How can I help you?
6. How can you help me?

Where are we going? This question tackled the big-picture priorities at the company. It forced Robert to articulate what he wanted for the company and what he was expecting from the executive. Answering this question, Robert described a vision that could be discussed openly, not merely guessed at. The back-and-forth dialogue was a first step in changing both the environment and Robert's reputation.

Where are you going? Robert then shifted to his view of where each executive should be going. Then he turned the table and asked each person to answer the same question, thus aligning their behavior and mindset with his. In short order, they were replicating Robert's candor and honesty about their responsibilities and goals.

What is going well? Bad as he was at setting clear goals, Robert scored almost as low at providing constructive feedback. No meetings, no opportunities to praise his superstars. So the third portion of every meeting required him to openly recognize recent achievements by the executive facing him. Then he asked a question seldom asked by leaders: "What do you think that you and your part of the organization are doing well?" This wasn't just a compulsory upbeat moment in a meeting. It helped Robert learn about good news that he may otherwise have missed.

Where can we improve? This forced Robert to give his direct reports constructive suggestions for the future — something he'd rarely done and that his people didn't expect from him. Then he added a challenge: "If you were your own coach, what would you suggest for yourself?" The ideas he heard amazed him, largely because they were often better than his suggestions. He was okay with that. He was not only shaping the world around him, he was learning from it.

How can I help? This is the most welcome phrase in any leader's repertoire. We can never say it enough, whether we're in the role of a parent or friend — or a busy CEO running a meeting. It has a reciprocal power few of us take advantage of. When we offer our help, we are nudging people to admit they need help. We are adding needed value, not interfering or imposing. That's what Robert was going for: building alignment between everyone's interests.

How can I become a more effective leader? Asking for help means exposing our weaknesses and vulnerabilities — not an easy thing to do. Robert wanted to be a role model CEO. By asking for ongoing help and focusing on his own improvement, he was encouraging everyone to do the same.

The improvements at Robert's company didn't happen overnight. But they never would have happened without some sort of structure. This simple list of questions played to Robert's strength. He had always been a great communicator with customers. Now he was deploying the same skill with employees.

In hindsight, the structure's biggest impact may have been to slow Robert down. Instead of always being on the go, he had to carve out serious time in his calendar for nine one-on-one meetings every two months.

Another key element in Robert's process was not just what he did every other month, but what each of his direct reports did in between the bi-monthly sessions. Robert involved his team in his own transformation toward becoming a better leader. Robert gave each team member *carte blanche* to call him on any leadership failing, to take personal responsibility for immediately contacting Robert if he or she felt confusion or ambiguity on direction, coaching, or feedback. Robert changed himself *and* his environment. Robert added structure. The team assumed responsibility. The combination produced amazing results.

When Robert retired four years later, his final 360-degree feedback report put him in the 98th percentile on "Provides clear goals and direction." What most amazed Robert was all the time he saved. He summed up: "I spent less time with my people when I was rated a 98 than I did when I was rated an 8. In the beginning, my team couldn't tell the difference between social chitchat and goal clarity. By involving them in a simple structure, I could give them what they needed from me in a way that respected their time and mine."

That's an added value of matching structure with our desire to change. Structure not only increases our chance of success, it makes us more efficient at it.