Three Questions To Improve Your Constructive Criticism

Few practices have as big an impact on employee morale and success as critical feedback, and few can be more challenging to get right. Effective feedback or evaluations can give employees and teammates the tools and support needed to not only leverage their strengths but improve on important aspects of their work. Doing this in a way that does not jeopardize relationships or an employee's confidence and drive in the workplace can be tricky. Difficult conversations take effort, and giving constructive criticism that leaves an employee with positive feelings and direction as opposed to disappointment and resentment is critical to a company's success. Here are several important questions to ask your own teams about having these conversations in the workplace.

1. Is It Responsive and Real Time?

An employee based in San Francisco recently noted that her annual review included feedback on areas of her work that could improve. The leadership team shared one or two examples where some errors had been made that their team kept a record of and brought to her attention in an annual December review. The only problem? The errors were made all the way back in June. It took six months for the leadership team to bring these issues to her attention. When asked how this made her feel, she highlighted that it did not set her up for success. She even felt resentment that her supervisors had not just told her immediately when an error or mistake was made so that she could respond and improve in real time. A lot can be forgotten about the context of mistakes months after they occur.

While employee evaluations can certainly be structured in the form of regular reviews, truly effective feedback is also responsive and uses specific moments as learning opportunities. It is also important to note that the length of time wasted between error and review could have been used for the employee to learn and develop, which may have also improved other areas of her work. For leadership, this was a missed opportunity, which brings us to the next question.

2. Does It Mentor and Develop?

All feedback, whether good or constructive, can be used to mentor and create more opportunities to learn on the job. If an employee has not walked away with clarity on how to improve or continue doing good work, we risk making other mistakes moving forward. Looking at the NCEO's employee survey data, around 49% of more than 10,000 employee responses either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that they receive sufficient feedback about their work to improve their performance. This means that for approximately 51% of employees who either disagree or find themselves on the fence, feedback is insufficient when it comes to improving the work they do. Like the story told above, these are missed opportunities.

Whenever a conversation between a supervisor and employee occurs, it is important not to assume the worst of a person's intentions and to make it clear that the company believes in each employee's capacity to learn and grow. Be sincere and show them you trust in their discretion to do the job effectively, and then be as specific as possible with the positive behaviors you think represent the company culture well or the behaviors you want to see less of and why. If you can use this moment to tie in larger company goals or desirable behaviors that align with your company values, even better. It can be a distraction to harp on the mistake for too long, so focus on development and what to do differently the next time a similar situation occurs. If the company has specific training tools, materials, or access to important company information that would help, this would be the time to direct them toward these resources. It is also important to create a safe environment to follow up or ask for any other assistance. This will give employees direction and a real sense of support and trust, which goes a long way.

3. Is It Creating Two-Way Communication?

While our intention is to be sincere, direct, and helpful, it can be difficult to garner the trust of someone you are giving critical and constructive feedback to. In reality, when feedback happens, it should never just be a one-way form of communication. Effective feedback should create lines of two-way communication between employee and supervisor. How much you listen can have a real impact on whether or not you have actually been heard and successful.

When beginning this conversation, highlight how certain employee behaviors align with specific outcomes or help your team or organization achieve its goals. You might even start by giving employees or colleagues the opportunity to reflect and respond on what they would improve if they could. Make sure they feel heard as well. Ask them if you have missed anything that might be important to be aware of. This could be a great opportunity to ask one of the many questions companies ask in their own employee feedback surveys, such as "What resources or tools would help you do your job more effectively?" or "What might you change to be more effective and successful at work?"

Indicating to employees that you value their input and trust that they are self-aware creates a sense of trust and buy-in to the process and a sense that the whole organization is in this together. It is much easier to hear and respond to feedback constructively when you know the people giving it to you are committed to the same process. This type of directness and sincerity creates norms of accountability among employees and leadership groups alike. ∎