



## Survival of the Fittest: Feedback is not for Sissies

*“It is not the most intelligent of the species that survive the longest, it is the most adaptable.” -- Charles Darwin*

In order to be persistently successful, people and organizations need to adapt continually to their environment. This requires information from the environment. The more active and open the feedback, the more effective the adaptation and change. Few leaders have truly open and honest feedback within their organizations.

**CEO disease:** not seeing the impact a leader’s mood has on the organization.

**Symptom:** when the leader has near-total ignorance about how his or her mood and actions appear to the organization.

The term “CEO disease” comes from the book *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002).

The higher up in an organization a leader goes, the less accurate his self-assessment is likely to be. The problem is a lack of candid feedback.

As one CEO expressed it, “I can’t put my finger on it, because no one is actually lying to me. But I can sense that people are hiding information, or camouflaging key facts,...they aren’t telling me everything I need to know.”

Sometimes people don’t share information due to fear of the leader’s commanding or pacesetter style. They do not want to be shot as the messenger. Many people want to appear upbeat and optimistic and do not want to be the one to rock the boat by delivering negative information. Whatever the motives, the result is a leader who only has partial information about what’s going on around him.

This may be true for every leader within the organization, not only for the CEO. There is a natural instinct to please the boss, resulting in a widespread tendency to give positive feedback whenever information flows upward.



Rona Fluney, a Certified Executive and Personal Coach, brings over ten years experience coaching leaders, executives, entrepreneurs and professionals. Her background includes leadership and board roles, project management, and consulting. Rona’s effervescent enthusiasm and

collaborative approach spurs clients to achieve business results, adopt and implement change, build on leadership capabilities, to step out of comfort zones, peak performance, and increase emotional intelligence.

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## Lack of Feedback at the Top

The problem is compounded when the leader is a woman or from a minority group. Women in general get less useful feedback about their performance in any position than do men. Similar studies show this to be true for Chinese and Indian executives as well.

Executives are often unaware of this dynamic. Many believe they are attuned to their environment because they ask questions and solicit feedback. They think they are getting the truth, but people have difficulty delivering the complete truth when the message is not favorable. And the more personal the message, the less chance it has of getting delivered at all.

Top executives typically get the least reliable information about how they are doing. A meta-analysis of 177 separate studies that assessed 28,000 managers found that performance feedback becomes more inconsistent the higher the person's position.

Often it is simply because it makes people uncomfortable to be candid. It is difficult to be frank without risking injury or backlash. Few people want to intentionally hurt another person's feelings, and they certainly don't want to be misinterpreted and accused of trying to do harm. Often silence is chosen rather than risk. People swing too far in the direction of "being nice" rather than being useful and providing accurate observations about behavior.

When people avoid giving honest feedback by sanitizing it to keep up comfort levels, they are doing a disservice. They are depriving their own leaders of valuable information.

## Seeking Negative Feedback

Emotionally intelligent leaders will actively seek out negative feedback as well as positive. They understand they need a full range of information to perform better, whether it makes them comfortable or not.

How should leaders seek out the truth? It is clear that it is up to them if they are to have the information they need to make changes and to adapt to the environment. Rare are those people who will dare tell a strong leader he or she is coming across as too commanding or harsh. People generally won't stand up and let a leader know he could be more visionary or more democratic.

A study of 400 executives shows that the most effective leaders actively seek negative feedback. They let it be known that they are open to receive critiques either of their ideas or their leadership. The least successful executives most often solicit confirming feedback.

## Using 360-Degree Assessments

The 360-degree assessment method offers a fuller picture for anyone wanting to develop a plan for improvement. Asking input of many people, subordinates, colleagues, superiors, peers and even family members can offer multiple perspectives. This multiple perspective is designed to give a fuller picture of the "real" person. How accurate this is depends on 1) whether the respondents interact regularly with the person and 2) whether the person reveals himself to others.

Since a person can be different with each person, it is important that many respondents be involved. An overall consensus is derived. Interestingly, one study shows that subordinates and peers are more predictive of a leader's success than their boss is. In this study of the effectiveness of leaders, how subordinates assessed the leader proved most predictive of the leader's success and effectiveness both two and four years following the assessment. Even after seven years, the subordinates' assessments were predicting the leader's success with far more accuracy than the boss's own assessments.

## The Gap Between Ideal and Real

Once the feedback is received, there exists the problem of looking at the difference between the ideal self and the real self. Examining this gap often leads to defensiveness. Since the drive to achieve is particularly strong in a leader, an emphasis on gaps often arouses feelings of anxiety and defensiveness. And once defensiveness sets in, it typically demotivates rather than motivates. This results in an interruption in learning. And when self-directed learning stops, there is little chance for change.

It is exactly this mechanism of defensiveness that is behind the problem of giving feedback. When one is candid, there is the risk of triggering emotions of defensiveness in the boss. Once a person is defensive, all of his or her energy goes into defending rather than looking at possibilities.

Leadership development programs sometime train how to give effective feedback, but it is rare that an individual becomes really adept at this. Leaders can teach people how to communicate with them by modeling and setting examples. Working with an executive coach can help develop feedback skills.

## Feedback that Works

An effective model of delivering feedback is set forth in *Feedback that Works* (Weitzel, 2000). There is a three-step process in delivering effective feedback:

1. Capture the situation
2. Describe the behavior
3. Describe the impact the behavior had

**Capture the situation:** You must be specific as to what happened, when it happened and the context. The more specific, the better. Refrain from making judgmental statements. Be as neutral as possible, avoiding words that might trigger defensiveness. The idea is to recall the event accurately.

**Describe the behavior:** You must give information about what behavior needs to stop or continue in order to improve performance. Avoid using adjectives that describe the person. Words that describe the person's actions are acceptable.

Observable behaviors should be described, as you are presenting facts here, not interpretations. This requires keen observational skills of nonverbal communication and body language.

**Describe the impact:** In the final step, you must focus on the impact of the behavior on you. This is not where you communicate what the impact may have on the organization or on other people.

When you interpret and make a judgment about the behavior, you are less effective because the person can become defensive and argue with your interpretation. You then share your personal point of view and ask the other person to view their behavior from your perspective.

**Feedback needs to be clear, specific, candid and concise.** It should not be judgmental (good/bad), blaming (fault/scapegoating), or come from right/wrong thinking. If delivered in any of these modes, it will trigger either active or passive defensiveness.

## Practice with a Coach

Executives who work intensely with an executive coach trained in the emotional competencies for successful leadership understand how much effort this can take. Managing emotional impulses is real mental work. The stress of the intentional effort to alter one's mood can deplete the energy required for self-control. Self-control is exactly what is needed when practicing a new leadership style.

Many executive coaches use learning strategies that involve a commitment to continual feedback from selected stakeholders. The executive must commit to and publicly identify the behaviors they want to work on. They must commit to dialoguing with each person in the group of selected stakeholders. The executive must be open to receiving feedback about his or her behavior. This method of including others into the coaching strategy is seen as an important element in creating effective change in leaders.

What inhibits growth and innovation, both personally and in organizations, is an attachment to one's self and what has worked in the past. In order to survive in a rapidly changing environment, executives must continually update what is working. Without feedback and particularly without sending the message that one is receptive to feedback, there is no new information for making adjustments. There can be little adaptation and change.

The problem lies in resistance. Most people fear negative feedback and will not actively seek it out. They may feel that they can't change anyway, that their ways are too ingrained.

Research on learning supports the view that the emotional competencies required for successful leadership can be learned. It requires bravery to face the opinions of subordinates, but high achievers do not shrink from tasks simply because they are new or uncomfortable. Receiving feedback is definitely not for sissies.

Staying out of defensive modes is essential to moving on and practicing new behaviors. These strategies are not easy and work best when guided by an experienced coach. Unless leaders get data about the quality and effectiveness of their interactions, they become prisoners of the status quo.

# Leadership Styles in a Nutshell

Source: Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Resonance occurs in organizations as a result of leaders' good moods and ability to say the right thing, and also from a particular leadership style. The most effective leaders are able to switch skillfully and flexibly among leadership styles according to organizational needs.

## VISIONARY

How it builds resonance: Moves people toward shared dreams  
Impact on Climate: Most strongly positive  
When appropriate: When changes require a new vision or when a clear direction is needed

## COACHING

How it builds resonance: Connects what a person wants with the organization's goals  
Impact on Climate: Highly positive  
When appropriate: To help an employee improve performance by building long-term capabilities

## AFFILIATIVE

How it builds resonance: Creates harmony by connecting people to each other  
Impact on Climate: Positive  
When appropriate: To heal rifts in a team, motivate during stressful times, or strengthen connections

## DEMOCRATIC

How it builds resonance: Values people's input and gets commitment through participation  
Impact on Climate: Positive  
When appropriate: To build buy-in or consensus, or to get valuable input from employees

## PACESETTING

How it builds resonance: Meets challenging and exciting goals  
Impact on Climate: Because too frequently poorly executed, often highly negative  
When appropriate: To get high-quality results from a motivated and competent team

## COMMANDING

How it builds resonance: Soothes fears by giving clear direction in an emergency  
Impact on Climate: Because so often misused, highly negative  
When appropriate: In a crisis, to kick-start a turnaround, or with problem employees

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