Fostering a Positive Feedback Environment

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

Most of us want to improve the quality and efficiency of our work. Central to this improvement is receiving feedback. If you are a manager or leader in your organization, you are in the crucial position of providing this feedback. In the ideal scenario, you have to have some help in this. The person you are working with needs the basic skills and ambitions necessary to advance in the organization. Just as importantly, the organization itself needs to value this improvement and provide the institutional structures to advance the individual's effort, such as annual reviews, promotion opportunities and appreciation of effort.

The leadership role of the manager, however, is crucial and is often needed to make up for shortcomings in the individual or the organization. Creating a positive feedback environment is critical to this management role.

Leadership Tips

Leadership Tips is an ongoing series produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies' *Medicaid Leadership Institute* in collaboration with O'Neil & Associates. The series is designed to provide general guidance to help leadership of state agencies and their senior managers develop and refine the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs. To view the full series, visit **www.chcs.org/leadership-tips**.

How to Create a Positive Feedback Environment

Long before specific feedback is given, it is helpful for managers and leaders to create a positive feedback environment. Such an environment supports the mutual expectation that everyone involved is on the team and the team has shared goals, values, culture, and expectations. While the lead manager is critical for establishing such an environment, when it is successful, everyone coaches everyone else, offers supportive comments and, when needed, helps think through how to improve the situation or address a problem.

Creating a healthy positive feedback environment requires continuous action by senior managers in leadership roles to help the team fully embrace such a culture. Here are five keys to fostering a positive feedback environment:

1. **Establish a clear sense of purpose and common ground**. All teams and work groups need this as the first step. Without both elements, they cannot answer basic questions such as "Where are we going?" and "What is in this for me?" or "How will success be measured?" It is the leader's job to facilitate this conversation and keep it going forward as new things arise and situations change.
2. **Accept every individual**. Most people come to new ventures with some anxiety about acceptance and performance. Some of this is constructive and produces effort, but it is important for the team leader to create an environment of acceptance and trust. Otherwise, it will be difficult to coach in a situation without it seeming judgmental at the personal level. This leads to defensiveness, cover-ups, and emotional outbursts, as the feedback seems more personal than professional. The ideal place to be is, "We are in this together and it is in all of our interests to address the problem."
3. **Recognize the two-way nature of most situations**. Almost every situation and dynamic in an organization that is problematic has two sides. Unfortunately, in many cases, discussions focus on fixing the blame on one side or the other, as in the oft-cited "he said-she said" dynamic. There are situations where one person or group has acted in a unilateral and conscious manner to be dishonest or harm another or subvert a process, and these should be dealt with accordingly. However, for the vast majority of problems, this perspective points to the reality that each side has contributed something to the situation and these elements need to be teased out and addressed.

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4. **Create the expectation of continuous improvement**. Every person on the team, including the leader must go into the situation with the expectation that a better job is always possible and can be achieved if everyone is helping everyone else improve. This means feedback goes in all directions.
5. **Sanction individuals who remain outside the culture**. Nothing will kill a feedback culture faster than a rogue individual who is left to create discord. This does not mean everyone has to agree, far from it. It does mean that individual behaviors that are inconsistent with a constructive feedback culture – unwillingness to share in feedback, vindictiveness when feedback is given, and/or using feedback to make personal attacks – are addressed immediately. Without such attention from the leader, all of the other efforts to create a culture will be for naught, worse the activities will seem hypocritical and bring out cynicism in others.

Giving Positive Feedback

Remember, a constructive feedback culture goes both ways. So, learning how to both give and receive feedback is essential. Here are general rules when giving feedback:

1. **Be confidential.** Feedback is always given in private and it is a conversation between you and the person receiving the feedback. Do not bring a lot of other people into this conversation by representing their feelings or attitudes.
2. **Be supportive.** The point of the feedback is improvement so that the person receiving it can improve and be successful in a work setting. Being non-judgmental is a major part of this. Be encouraging and non-threatening. Attacking in anyway will just make the person you want to influence defensive, resentful, and likely to not hear any of the things you want to say.
3. **Be clear**. If it is important to offer feedback, then it is important to be clear about what you want to say. Here are some steps to clarity:
   - Think about what you will say beforehand;
   - Share your talking points with another person, someone totally outside of the work setting;
   - Question your own motivations in giving the feedback; and
   - Imagine what the outcome is you would like.
4. **Be timely**. Nothing is worse than waiting until the annual review to give feedback on something that was important, but happened six months ago. While it is important to be timely, it is also wise to remember to give yourself some time to cool off if the item of feedback you want to share has brought out an emotional response in you.
5. **Speak from a non-emotional, but caring space.** This may be the most challenging element in giving feedback, but it is essential. If you are still "steaming" about something, you have to regain your composure before you engage in feedback, nothing constructive will be gained and there is the real potential for damage, wasted time, and even bigger problems. Step away, wait a day, cool down, think about the situation and what you want to achieve, but then have the courage to re-engage.
6. **Focus on a specific behavior or situation**. General feedback is generally a fuzz ball when the feedback giver is uncomfortable with what needs to be said. Just say it, a clear, short non-judgmental message opens the door for a conversation to solve the problem. Anything else opens the door to lack of clarity, emotional response, and inappropriate escalation of the significance of the problem.
7. **Describe, don't judge**. Your job is to raise the issue and broaden the understanding. If you have already decided what caused the problem and what needs to be done, then you are not giving feedback, you are passing judgment. This is where the famous "I" statements can help. That said, you should not give up your opinion or what you have observed, but you should signal that it is only one perspective and invite them to share their view.

Remember to not generalize or make absolutist statements such as "You always do that." Don't make a simple situation worse by overreacting.

8. **Direct the feedback to changeable behavior**. Observing that someone should be smarter about something is too vague and not helpful feedback. Observing that they were quick in making a judgment and reacting and that others and you seemed to be offended by this action is a more-specific observation they can consider and perhaps do something about.
9. **Don't lead with advice**. Feedback is not advice giving. It is sharing observations about a situation. After that is understood and valued, then it is possible to guardedly offer advice. In a constructive feedback culture, the advice is generally asked for right away. A helpful question for the feedback-giver at the outset of feedback is, "Are you getting the results you want from this approach?" Let the other person answer and then ask if there are alternatives.
10. **Check it, briefly**. It is quite all right to check to see if the feedback is understood, but do so briefly. After two checks, the questioning becomes abusive as in "What part of this *don't* you understand."

Remember that constructive feedback is always given to help the individual who is receiving it. The more the feedback comes across as supportive and helpful, then the more successful it will be. This does not mean that continued inattention does not require more specific requests for change from the manager, leader, or co-worker. But such a response should always be reserved until needed.

Incorporating Feedback into Review and Performance Cycles

While annual reviews are an important opportunity to look at the big picture from the past year and to plan for the coming year, the annual review is not a good time for feedback. If feedback on an issue was important in June, it should have been given at the time, not in March when annual reviews are held. A development plan has some of the annual review and goal setting of an annual review, but is more focused on personal professional growth and should become a way for activity to be shaped and reinforced throughout the year.

Feedback, Annual Review and Development Planning

	Time Frame	Focus On	Context	Perspective	Outcome
Feedback	Immediate	A specific behavior or incident	Informal, don't elevate the significance	In the moment	Improved understanding of a particular incident
Annual Review	Annual or at regular intervals, such as quarterly	The bigger picture annual progress against goals and 360 input from others	Formal, set aside an hour for annual reviews and half an hour for check-ins	Reflects back on past work and forward to future work and change	Evaluation of the past year's overall performance and outcomes and a plan for personal and professional activity in the coming year
Development Plan	Annual, at regular intervals, and reinforced continuously	The bigger picture of personal and professional development and growth for coming year	Formal as above, but continuous throughout the year	Assess professional and personal development goals in near- and longer-term future	Clarity about general direction desired of growth and specific plans to achieve it in the coming year

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About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit **www.oneil-and-associates.com**; contact Ed O'Neil at herringoneil@gmail.com.

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