
Feedback Loopholes

By Lothar Katz

(You) *I meant to ask you: how have I been doing lately, performance-wise?*

(Your boss) *Well, there is an issue I've been meaning to talk to you about. I didn't quite like the way you handled your last project, and here's why: [...]*

Sounds familiar? If you are American, the answer is probably 'not really.' Bosses in the U.S., at least the decent ones, learn early on to start and end performance feedback on an encouraging note, squeezing what may be the *real* message in-between the two positive blocks. This 'sandwich,' as this style of delivering feedback is often called, usually goes something like this:

(Your boss) *You're doing great in many areas. For example, I really liked ... [example] and ... [example]. Where you may want to focus a bit more is in ... [problem area] because ... [example]. But overall, you're a really solid performer and with just a little more focus, I am convinced you can become one of the best contributors on the team.*

The purpose of the 'sandwich' is to give employees balanced feedback in ways that avoid demotivating them. At the same time, it caters to the subordinates' need to be valued and feel good about themselves. All of which makes perfect sense, so why would anybody in the world do this differently?

Well, bosses using the 'sandwich' could be in for a surprise with a German or Dutch employee, for instance. It goes without saying that in these cultures, where direct and frank communication is generally favored, feedback should also cover both, the good and the not-so-good aspects of job performance. It is also still important here to end on a positive note, rather than risking to frustrate and demotivate the employee. However, sandwiching feedback likely weakens the impact of more critical aspects. In direct cultures, people tend to take messages literally, so employees hearing praise-critique-praise may draw a conclusion along the lines of "She/he just **had** to find something to nag about so it wouldn't sound like I'm doing **everything** right. Things are fine, though." While the 'sandwich' is a good approach when dealing with highly direct cultures if 'fairly good' is indeed the intended message, a boss wanting to get a point of critique across clearly may be better advised to start with the critical aspects.

Needless to say: there is also the opposite end of the spectrum. In cultures where highly indirect communication is the norm, for instance much of Asia, feedback is generally delivered, if at all, in the form of generalizations or through neutral-sounding stories. That makes it easy to miss the salient point for Westerners on the receiving end, while Western bosses run a risk of Asian employees interpreting critical feedback much more harshly than it was intended. As always in cross-cultural communication, paying attention to the other's background is helpful.

Not sure if you noticed, but the dialog starting this essay includes another, rather 'exotic' element: you **ask** for feedback?! Honestly, how often do you do that? For most people, the answer is probably "rarely if ever." Many humans are reluctant to ask anyone, let alone their boss, for feedback, fearing what they might hear could challenge their views of themselves and/or affect the relationship with the other person. As understandable as it may be, this reluctance cuts them off what may well be their biggest personal development opportunity. After all, how can you determine how others see you and achieve greater impact by adjusting behaviors accordingly, without ever getting feedback from them?

Another type of individual is one who asks for feedback but seemingly does not want to hear anything other than "You're great!" In the face of critical feedback, this type starts arguing, aiming to convince others that their views are wrong. Unsurprisingly, these individuals soon run out of people who are willing to give them honest feedback, which in essence creates the same dilemma as above.

Neither of these types is culture-specific. What they have in common is that they risk missing out on the most valuable way –by far– to develop oneself: feedback (*). Frequently giving quality feedback and encouraging it from others are qualities that characterize successful people.

American, German, Chinese, or else: it does not matter.

(*) If you are not convinced, may I suggest reading our [Book of the Quarter?](#)

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