

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2023 Edition

Feature

The Connection Between Feedback, Trust and Conflict

High trust is the key ingredient

Michelle Phaneuf
P.Eng., ACC
Partner, Workplace
Fairness West

Creating a *culture of feedback* is a phrase we often hear in workplaces. This is because each of us needs feedback in order to grow and employee growth is essential for effective organizational growth. Organizations may be spending a large amount of their budget on leadership training to ensure leaders are learning skills and tools to provide feedback effectively. I've noticed that even when these tools are used appropriately, feedback does not always land successfully and defensiveness rears its head. When defensiveness is present, growth is not. This is most likely because trust plays an important role in feedback.

We witness strong defensiveness when feedback is provided in situations when trust is low, say for example between a leader and employee. As a neutral third party, I'm sometimes viewed as a more trusted person, especially if an employee is in conflict with their leader. I could repeat the same feedback word for word and it was well accepted coming from me, with little defensiveness created. This can be frustrating for the feedback provider and upon further exploration, the recipient will often acknowledge that they are unaware of the dynamic. In general, the success of giving feedback has little to do with the ability of the speaker and more to do with the level of trust or quality of the working relationship. When employees and their leaders are in conflict, the working relationship may be damaged and trust is likely low.

I've discovered a four-square grid created by John Spencer (<https://spencerauthor.com/why-trust-is-vital-to-peer-feedback/>), an educator who looked at student peer feedback (positive/negative) and levels of trust (high/low). The squares are labeled Affirmation, Flattery (positive feedback with high and low trust respectively) and Critical Feedback and Hating (negative feedback with high and low trust respectively). The grid reflects that with low trust, negative feedback could be seen as hating, creating a very defensive reaction. Mutual or high trust is vital for critical or meaningful feedback. Employees' defenses will be less pronounced if someone they trust is involved and they are able to hear the feedback that will help them change and grow. If trust is low, positive feedback may not be seen as authentic and viewed as flattery or insincere. With those whom employees place high trust in, positive feedback can create a true sense of affirmation. How many of us have remembered positive feedback from a trusted leader years after it was given?

John Spencer also explored the level of trust in conjunction with the type of feedback given in a continuum style range. He summarized that the level of trust increases as the feedback becomes more personal. The level of trust needs to be high (far right of the continuum) when the feedback type is about factors that have deep meaning to employees like values or character. This feedback cuts to the core of who they are, their identity and beliefs. Defensiveness will be high if trust is low. Less trust may be required to provide feedback on an employee's actions or the concrete behaviours that a leader has observed. This might include issues such as communication style, interactions with others and the specific undertakings during a project. As we move further down the trust continuum (to the left) we come to ideas, perhaps specific ideas regarding the processes being used within an important work project. Less trust may be required to provide feedback in this area. On the far-left end of the continuum, requiring the least amount

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2023 Edition

Feature continued

of trust is providing feedback on an employee's creative work. This could look like the specific products they have created, but it may also include any kind of work that they are doing on a project.

As a leader, awareness of the link between trust and feedback as indicated in this grid and continuum are important when providing feedback, especially if the working relationship is not strong or there is a conflict situation. Time, energy and appropriate budgets will be needed to focus on restoring the working relationship and rebuilding trust before feedback can be effective for all.

Michelle Phaneuf is Partner at Workplace Fairness West and can be reached via email at phaneuf@workplacefairnesswest.ca.