

HOW TO CREATE A FEEDBACK CULTURE

Employee engagement and business success benefit from a culture of feedback in the workplace. Five steps can foster this environment, and are especially useful in today's large, global organisation

by *Melissa Lamson*

Idon't hear anything from their side" is the number one complaint that individuals express when working in cross-cultural, virtual and global teams. There are three forms of feedback that this article will deal with: that of general responsiveness (or lack thereof), accolades or praise, and criticism (hopefully constructive). Feedback is a necessary component to doing business successfully, particularly when working globally. Studies have shown that employee engagement soars when a culture of feedback exists in their company. It has also been proven that employees are more satisfied at work when they receive regular feedback. It is one of the number one issues that comes up in employee surveys (in and of itself a feedback tool), and when asked about their opinions, individuals regularly ask the question whether their feedback will be integrated into actions taken by the organisation.

Companies have unique, and not so unique, methods of responding, delivering accolades and offering criticism. Responsiveness is easy to remedy: tell people you expect a response. Mandate it, request it, state it, etc. Accolades are also relatively unproblematic: everyone appreciates them if they are sincere and well-meant. However there are cultures that feel too much praise is a nuisance, they assume there must be an exaggeration, or wonder if the source is trustworthy if real content or action is not referenced. But for the most part, people can live with praise in its various forms.

Where most organisations could use assistance in delivering feedback is in the area of criticism, or as it is sometimes more diplomatically called, "constructive criticism". Thus, this article provides five steps that your global, cross-cultural, and diverse organisation can use to create

a culture of feedback – a culture in which you learn to give and receive constructive criticism and translate it into success, efficiency and productivity.

FIVE STEPS TO CREATING A CULTURE OF FEEDBACK – 1: DEFINE THE CULTURE OF YOUR ORGANISATION

In order to understand what needs to change, it is important to reflect on the current situation. One technical definition of culture is that it is a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs and attitudes that shapes and influences perception and behaviour. One's culture becomes the norm, as systems are shared and therefore reinforced. A team creates or establishes its own unconscious and conscious ways of behaving, operating and communicating in ways that may or may not have been explicitly discussed. More often than not, teams rely on inexplicit cues to orient members to the desired behaviour. Additionally, the team leader or project manager usually sets the standard for such cues. It is critical to become conscious of expectations and then to define the team culture. Once the existing culture of your or-



organisation, team or group is defined, it is only then possible to develop a plan of action for creating a culture of feedback.

In order to define your organisation's culture, ask the following questions of team members:

- *What are the keywords that best describe your team?*
- *How do individuals dress? Behave? Structure themselves?*
- *How do people express pleasure or displeasure?*
- *What is the meeting culture?*
- *How would you describe team members' work-styles?*
- *What are the preferred communication tools (email, IM, etc)?*
- *How are individuals oriented towards time, space, or relationships to co-workers ?*

After collecting the answers to these questions, strengths as well as weaknesses in team efficiency will become clear. Focusing on organisational culture provides an appropri-

ate channel for individuals to express their needs, while diffusing any potential frustration. It also allows team leads to modify and set alternate cues that provide a more inclusive and flexible teamwork environment.

2: AGREE ON COMMUNICATION STYLES From a young age, people learn a culturally "appropriate" way to express their opinions, agreement or disagreement, as well as a willingness to respond to a request. There are two principle styles of communication which most individuals use: direct and indirect. Which one is preferred is primarily rooted in national cultural traits. For example, according to research, Israelis and Germans are the most direct communicators in the world, whereas Japanese and Indians are two of the most indirect. Of course there are exceptions within a country, however in general you will find that being direct in Germany is an acceptable and preferred practice, whereas in Japan, being more indirect is the norm.

There is a simple way to measure where one falls on the scale between direct and indirect. Direct cultures will use the word "No" when they disagree or haven't been convinced yet, but this doesn't mean they're upset or that the conversation is over. In fact, quite the opposite – it means they are ready for a discussion to see if they can see another point of view. By contrast, indirect cultures will use the phrase, "Yes, and..." to share another opinion or idea if they don't agree or are not yet convinced. For example,



“That’s a good idea – however, we might want to look at other options, too.” When someone from an indirect culture says, “No”, it might mean they are upset and that they would like to end the conversation.

Direct Cultures: “No”

Indirect Cultures: “Yes, and” or “Yes, but”

Giving feedback is very different between direct and indirect cultures. A direct culture won’t hesitate to be critical and constructive criticism is seen as necessary and good. For an indirect culture, criticism must be delivered carefully. For example, a direct culture might state, “I don’t find the approach to that procedure sensible.” An indirect culture would say, “There are many possible approaches to that procedure, perhaps we should discuss a few of them.” Direct cultures find the perceived vagueness of indirect cultures frustrating, and in contrast, indirect cultures can become easily offended by a direct approach. It is nearly impossible for emotions not to rise. However, it is possible for your team to agree on a style of message delivery that suits everyone.

3: USE A SYSTEMIC COMMUNICATION METHOD

One way to successfully meet the needs of all team members is to use a systemic communication method to manage message delivery. First, ask if you can give another person feedback before you just jump in and tell them what you think. Second, focus on the positive first, avoid judgment, stick with the facts, and neutralise any negative emotions. Share with them what you think could be changed or improved. Third, once you have delivered your comments, allow them to summarise and reflect what they think they heard you say. This gives you a chance to clarify any misunderstandings and make sure the constructive feedback is not taken too personally. Consider this sample dialogue:

Person 1: Would you like to hear some feedback about your presentation?

Person 2: I would, thank you.

Person 1: The audience was engaged and the message was clearly presented.

Person 2: Thank you.

Person 1: More content regarding our future goals would be beneficial next time. The company is going through so much change right now, it’s helpful to give people a road-map into the future.

Person 2: So, if I understand you correctly, I could include more details about future objectives for the company?

Person 1: Exactly.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fostering feedback in five steps

- ➔ Define the culture
- ➔ Agree on communication styles
- ➔ Use a systemic method of communication
- ➔ Optimise communication tools
- ➔ Foster continuous improvement

With a systemic communication method, it makes it easier for people to make themselves understood as well as to give and receive critical feedback.

4: OPTIMISE THE TOOLS OF COMMUNICATION

The most under-discussed topic in teams is how individuals should communicate with each other. Communication tools and the way they are used, are taken for granted. Everyone knows how to write emails, to make phone

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calls, or especially today, how to send an instant message (IM). Most teams use all forms of communication. However, there is quite a bit of virtual miscommunication and misunderstanding in global teamwork, particularly when negative topics are discussed or critical feedback is delivered. Take time in your organisation or group to talk about and decide explicitly how and when

the team will use all available communication tools. Set guidelines, rules, best practices, or standards for email, IM, phone, and video conference usage and stick to them. To do this, refer to the team culture, what your standards are in communication generally, and particularly how feedback is given and received.

It is important to understand that even with all the advantages of virtual communication, one of the drawbacks is that virtual communication methods eliminate visual cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, which convey meaning and emotion. Verbal or written feedback is the only indicator of mutual understanding. Studies have shown that the phone is 10 times more effective and efficient than email, and face-to-face is 10 times more effective and efficient than phone.

For example: one client, a team leader, made a rule that emails could not be longer than three sentences. If more information was to be relayed, then the person writing the email had to schedule a call. Additionally, there was another client who decided that “Houston” would be their code word for “Stop the email trail, it’s starting to get too complicated!” And whoever wrote “Houston” would be responsible for calling a meeting by phone or video conference to clarify and discuss the situation.

5: FOSTER CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT Team accountability is critically important if tools are not working or there is a breakdown in communication, otherwise initially-agreed upon procedures, standards or rules will not stick. Make time for regular feedback sessions to discuss how the team’s feedback culture is working. Find out how people feel

and what is working or not working well. Most importantly, find out how criticism is being relayed appropriately and if team members are given a chance to improve and progress.

In order to foster continuous improvement, ask individuals (separately) in your team the following questions:

- *What is your feeling about the feedback culture in the team?*
- *Do you give and get regular feedback?*
- *Do you feel others respect the guidelines we’ve agreed upon?*
- *What could be improved?*

Keep the questions open and practice listening using the systemic communication method. Those global team members who are from more indirect cultures will then have a chance to express their thoughts freely and feel as though they are being heard. In order to foster and accelerate constant improvement, the process of developing a culture of feedback in your global team must be continuous. Discuss, set standards, hold people accountable, review and reflect on the results. In time, your organisation will operate seamlessly and team members will exhibit a strong sense of trust in the team lead and members.

CONCLUSION By practising these five steps to creating a culture of feedback, the phrase, “I don’t hear anything from their side” should turn into “I’m in regular communication with...”. Accolades or praise, as well as constructive criticism, will be more common amongst your highly motivated and more productive cross cultural team members. This is your key to creating high-performing global teams for world-class business results. █



Melissa Lamson
Cultural Transformation
Expert, Executive Coach,
Author, Speaker

For over 15 years, Melissa Lamson has helped individuals, governmental organisations and Fortune 500 companies located all over the world respond to global business needs, leveraging innovation and outpacing the competition. Founder and president at Lamson Consulting, LLC, she is also frequently engaged as a speaker, has a master’s in intercultural relations, and is the author of *No Such Thing As Small Talk: 7 Keys to Understanding German Business Culture*. Her clients include 3M, Bombardier, Commerzbank, Cisco, MTV, and SAP.

