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Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

Are You a Good Leader? Here's One Way to Find Out.

Some companies spend an amazing amount of money and time on management classes and leadership training. But some of the best answers on how to improve your leadership style may be just outside your office door. Who better to judge your leadership style than your own employees?

Often, leaders are reluctant to ask their employees for feedback because they fear it may turn it into an unproductive "gripe session." Or, they may believe asking for feedback will raise unpleasant issues they're not ready to address. Still other leaders mistakenly believe that asking their employees for feedback makes them appear weak. (When actually, quite the opposite may be true.)

If your goal is to be a great leader, you owe it to yourself to learn everything you can about how to improve your leadership skills. Asking your employees for feedback is in itself, one of the most important leadership skills you can possess.

How to Get Meaningful Feedback

If you want to hear only the best about yourself, call a staff meeting and ask each employee face-to-face, "So, what do you think about my leadership style?" Chances are, you'll hear exactly what you want to hear and learn exactly nothing.

Giving constructive feedback doesn't come naturally to most people, and giving feedback to your "boss," carries even more perceived risk. Just as there is a method to *giving* effective feedback to your employees, there are also effective ways of *getting* it from them.

Who Should I Ask?

As leaders, each of us should practice the habit of frequently asking for feedback from those we lead and serve. However, most leaders find it helpful to use a more thorough, systematic approach from time to time. Among the most effective tools for obtaining this type of feedback are upward evaluations, 360-degree feedback and employee surveys.

Upward evaluations provide an assessment from the perspective of the employees or managers who report directly to the leader. **360-degree feedback** provides an evaluation that includes input from the individual's supervisors, colleagues, and direct reports. **Employee surveys** typically measure employee attitudes and organizational strengths and weaknesses, in addition to leadership style and effectiveness.

The decision of whom to ask – whether direct reports only, a "circle" of raters, or your entire workforce – depends on your objective and the type of feedback you wish to receive. Generally, upward evaluations and 360-degree feedback support personal leadership development, whereas employee surveys, being broader in nature, are better for surfacing organizational leadership issues.

What to Ask

Certainly, you'll want to tailor the questions you ask to specific goals or concerns. At a minimum, some questions to ask include:

- Does the leader treat all employees fairly?
- Is the leader ethical? How is or is this not demonstrated?
- Is the leader direct and clear when giving instructions?
- Does the leader create teamwork or dissension?

- Does the leader listen to feedback and act accordingly?
- Does the leader walk the talk?
- Does the leader reward individuals and teams rather than take credit for him/herself?
- Does the leader set appropriate goals and give you the support and time to do the job?
- Does the leader have positive relationships with his or her subordinates and peers?

How to Ask

The quality and quantity of information you receive is greatly dependent on how you ask for it. Rather than asking for general feedback, request specific details and examples. Rather than asking only numerically rated questions, include some open-ended questions and a comments section. In addition, to gain the most candid feedback, it is critical to keep the information confidential and anonymous.

For these and other reasons, many companies use an outside facilitator to conduct the process and present the results to the leader and employees. While hiring a consultant requires a bigger financial investment than handling it on your own, it almost always results in a more effective process, better quality of feedback, and greater employee commitment to providing candid feedback.

When the Results Are In

Follow up is crucial to the process of soliciting feedback. Many leaders find the best approach is to have an open meeting with all employees to review concerns and issues that arose and to discuss how they will be addressed. This is a powerful step that tangibly demonstrates to employees that their responses were not merely an exercise. Follow up also helps to ensure that negative issues won't continue to fester.

Next, take steps to address the most pressing concerns. Do it immediately, willingly and publicly.

While the prospect of asking others how to improve your leadership style may seem daunting, the answers you receive will ultimately benefit you, your employees and your business. The process can produce excellent benefits, but can be challenging.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Margaret Wilson at 410-296-6200 or via email: margaret@mksh.com.

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