

Creating a Candid Culture in the Workplace

*The fact is we're all a bunch of wimps.
Even our closest friends don't speak up about the things we do that disappoint them.
They don't want to cause conflict, hurt our feelings, or damage the relationship. But
when someone does not speak up, the relationship is damaged anyway.*

Shari Harley
Author, *How to Say Anything to Anybody*

Eileen C. Begle
Senior Assistant County Attorney
Office of Harris County Attorney
Vince Ryan

OLSON & OLSON LLP
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

13th Annual Local Government Seminar
January 19, 2017

CREATING A CANDID CULTURE IN THE WORKPLACE

We Need Feedback if We Want to Get Anywhere in Life

Without feedback, we really don't know how we're doing at work. Information is power. Without candid information about our performance and peoples' perceptions of our work and character, we can't advance our own careers. And let's face it: most managers do not give enough REAL feedback (whether positive or negative) to staff. Managers have a litany of excuses to avoid it.

- We all want to be liked.
- We're afraid of confrontation.
- We're afraid of legal liability.
- We are busy with other work.
- We don't know what to say.
- **Insert your own excuse here.**



That's the conundrum. We need to know how we're doing, yet many (most?) of the bosses won't give it. Why not ask for it? And if we want feedback, we have to be willing to give it to those men and women on our teams. Otherwise, they don't know how they're doing. In workplaces where people aren't empowered to speak candidly to one another, chaos reigns. Morale goes down when employees see coworkers NOT being held accountable. Gossip goes up. Petty bickering over trivial matters occurs regularly. And, of course, productivity and employee engagement take a nosedive.

If we can create a culture where "feedback" isn't synonymous with "bad news" or "you're in trouble," and where we give and receive feedback that is timely, quick, and specific to one issue at a time, then we will all be more likely to give feedback AND be less defensive when we receive it. It is, after all, intended for our success – which leads to organizational success.

My presentation is based on only a very small portion of the book *How to Say Anything to Anyone* by Shari Harley. **If you're actually reading this paper, you should know that I'll have three copies of the book at the seminar to offer as bribes¹ for audience participation.**

¹ **Not** the kind found in chapter 36 of the Texas Penal Code.

Two Reasons for Feedback

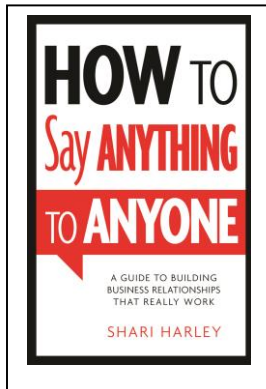
There are only two reasons to give someone feedback. One is to **maintain** current behavior. The other is to **change** current behavior. Everything else is probably just gossip – or information shared based on the giver’s desperate need to prove he knows more than you do.

Feedback Must be Based on Facts not Opinions

| FACTS (Behaviors) | Opinions (Attributes) |
|--|--|
| Helped Jane with her presentation for the city council meeting | Team player |
| Refused to help Bob inventory the supply room when Jane was in the hospital | Not a team player |
| Said, “That’s stupid,” when Clyde suggested a change to the accounting procedure Interrupted Clyde while he was making a comment during the staff meeting | Rude Dismissive Arrogant |
| Waited in his office for another assignment after finishing work instead of asking what else he could do to help | Lazy |
| Raised his voice in the monthly meeting when he got mad at Clyde | Aggressive Bully |
| Produces work that is timely and accurate | Good worker |
| Stays late or works weekends when necessary to meet deadlines | Dedicated Hardworking |
| Regularly questions decisions, like asking why someone else couldn’t be assigned to do the report | Bad attitude Difficult to work with |

Feedback that is too vague doesn't help – even with positive feedback. Throwing around phrases like, “Good job, John!” even in front of John's co-workers isn't good enough. If you can't specify something about the job John did that you want him to continue doing, your praise rings hollow. “John, I like that the figures in the report were 100% accurate and you finished it a day ahead of schedule.” NOW, John knows what to repeat in the future. And even if you chose to ignore that John used a font that you hate (on this particular report), you have room to tell him about that later WITHOUT the possibility of him saying, “But, you said I did a good job!”

Steps for Giving Effective Feedback



Here are Harley's eight steps for giving effective feedback. Links to two of her videos are found in the Additional Resources section of this paper.

1. Explain what you're going to talk about and why.
Hey, Mark, do you have a minute? I care about you and your career and I want to talk to you about something that I think is getting in the way.
2. Empathize.
 - *This may be a little awkward, but we'll get through it quickly.*
 - *This may be awkward for you, but I'd rather you hear it from me.*
 - *I probably should have said something a long time ago. I'm sorry I didn't.*
3. Say, “I've noticed...” then say the facts.
This needs to be timely, usually within 24 hours.
4. Describe the impact on the organization.
What happened because of the behavior you're trying to change? Did someone have to stay late to finish the report?
 - *(Re: angry outbursts): I don't want anyone to be afraid or refuse to work with you in the future.*
 - *(Re:*
5. Ask the person, “What are your thoughts?”
6. Make a suggestion.
7. Get an agreement from the person.
“Do you think you can try that?”
8. Say, “Thank you.”
 - *“Thanks. When I see this improving, I'll let you know.”*

The entire conversation takes less than 2 minutes. We should be having these conversations frequently. Spending an hour going over everything an employee did wrong in the last six months is wasted time.

Setting Clear Expectations



It's never too late to start clarifying expectations. We need to let people know that we WANT them to succeed. After all, their success is our success – which yields better services to the public. Let people know that in this workplace we give lots of feedback. It doesn't mean a job is in jeopardy. It doesn't mean we don't like you. (In fact, it means we CARE ABOUT YOU enough to share the truth with you.)

We need to teach people how to *receive* feedback. It always starts with trying NOT to get defensive. (See that "Cause We're Human" graphic.) And ends with saying, "Thank you." We're thankful that someone cared enough to help us get better.

Stop Guessing. Ask More Questions.

Have conversations (face-to-face) to find out about the people you work with. What are their working style preferences? What are their pet peeves? The more we know about the people we work with, the less likely we will be to behave in ways that hurt the relationship.

Conclusion

Because I am convinced that the single biggest contributor to low morale in most workplaces is employees seeing management fail to address behavior and performance issues promptly, **and because I only get 20 minutes to speak**, I chose to focus my time on the feedback formula. If we set clear expectations with our coworkers of how we like to work, we'll probably get along better. And if we teach everyone the eight simple steps for giving even feedback and actually use it regularly, **if** something happens that upsets someone, we've empowered them to handle it at the lowest level. That's cost effective!

The book offers so much more. How to ask your boss for feedback. How to set clear expectations with your colleagues, your boss, and other stakeholders. How to receive feedback graciously. And how to know when to cut your losses.

The Decision Tree²

We've seen that great leaders work to develop their employees. We've also learned that actively engaged employees take ownership in their work. And, in the Situational Leadership® model we learned that R4 employees are able, confident, and willing to perform. Here is one helpful tool for delegating work, which frees up your time for more important tasks. The Decision Tree also ensures that your employees will continue to develop.

Imagine the Precinct as a beautiful tree that bears fruit. Precinct employees make decisions every day to make sure the tree remains healthy and continues to grow. Basically, there are four types of decisions.

Leaf Decisions:

Make the decision. Act on it. Do not report the action you took.

Branch Decisions:

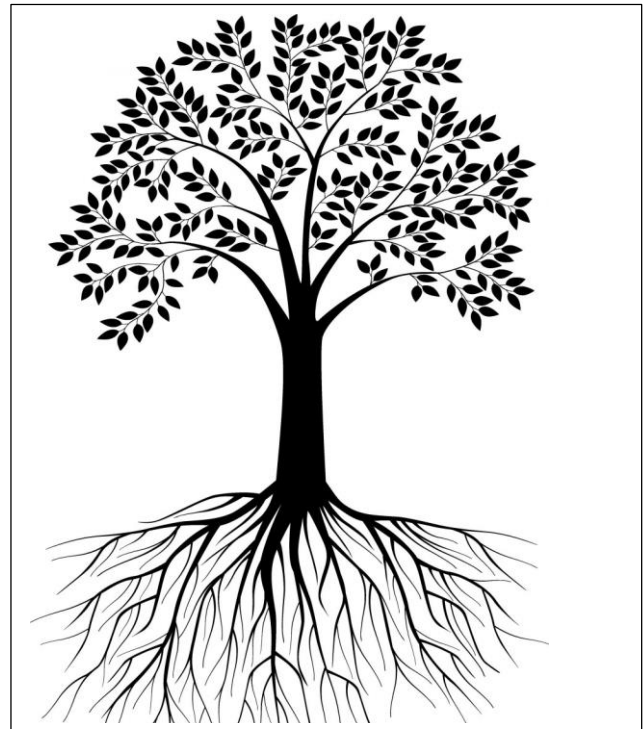
Make the decision. Act on it. Report the action you took daily, weekly, or monthly.

Trunk Decisions:

Make the decision. Report your decision *before* you take action.

Root Decisions:

Make the decision jointly, with input from many people. Root decisions, if poorly made and executed, have the potential to cause major damage to the precinct.



Each decision is important for the life of the tree. A poor leaf decision won't kill the whole tree. But a root level decision that is poorly made or executed can have disastrous consequences.

Use the Decision Tree with your employees to clarify your current expectations of them. Start by explaining the model and asking the employee to think about all the decisions he or she makes in performing the job. Once you both agree about where the decisions fall on the tree, set boundaries. For instance, if an employee asks for your help making a trunk decision, don't make the decision for him. That wastes your time and stymies his professional development. Instead, tell him you'll be happy to discuss it with him when he comes with a decision.

² The Decision Tree model is from *Fierce Conversation: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, by Susan Scott (Viking 2002).



Additional Resources.

The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us (10:48)

Dan Pink

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc>

How to Tell Someone They Smell

Shari Harley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpLLxcHCBP0>

Giving Feedback – Put the Girls Away

Shari Harley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28N2p3smEsw>