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Upstream Feedback: Unlocking the Power of Employee Engagement

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Peter and Susan Glaser, PhDs

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Research is clear: The higher a person's position in an organization, the less they hear information central to improving individual and organizational performance. And while upstream feedback is a crucial form of organizational communication, it is often the least engaged.

Employees are understandably reluctant to offer corrective feedback to someone with leverage over their career advancement and livelihood. Since minimizing "lag time" (how long it takes from someone seeing a problem to speaking about it) is correlated with organizational effectiveness, systematizing upstream feedback is critical.

In a recent study by the Crucial Learning Group, 93% of 1,193 respondents agreed that important issues went unaddressed for multiple weeks or longer. Unsurprisingly, the shorter the lag time gap

the healthier the team. Conversely, the more time spent avoiding challenging conversations, the worse the outcomes including: higher stress, wasted time, lower morale, reduced productivity and poor retention.

In our Upstream Feedback program we developed two tracks of behavioral learning:

1. Employees learn to make candor kind and transformative.
2. Managers learn to listen to input openly and empathically.

Track 1: Employees communicate feedback that is candid, kind, and transformative.

1. **Kind candor requires emotional literacy** so that people can name and communicate their feelings and convert accusative generalities into I-feeling descriptions. Instead of a generic accusation like “you keep piling work on my desk because of your unwillingness to say ‘no’ to any new projects,” an employee might learn to say, “I’m struggling to prioritize which of my projects is most urgent and I fear the quality of my work is suffering. I need your help.”
2. **Pinpointing details is key** because vague inflames, and specifics instruct. “Last week you assigned me an unplanned, high priority project and nothing left my workload. I know this was an important grant opportunity. I wish we would have talked first about how to realign my priorities.”
3. **Acknowledging your contribution to the problem** being raised is one of the most counter-intuitive yet powerfully disarming aspects of human communication. ‘I have been silent about my heavy workload for the last two months, so you would have no way of knowing my bandwidth was gone’
4. **End with an action plan.** Be sure to clarify: What are our next steps? What will each of us do? How often should we meet to monitor how we’re doing?
5. **Remember and activate the power of listening** by remaining curious, not furious. Pause, ponder, and paraphrase to ensure clarity and understanding.
6. **The glue of gratitude** holds this all together. At the beginning of an upstream dialogue, the end, and throughout. Our model to make this brief and authentic is thank, specific, benefit, thank.

Track 2: Managers listen to input openly and empathically.

1. **Power Listening:** Be curious, not furious Research is clear: It is difficult to simply stop a behavior yet easier to change one by replacing it with another. In this case, rather than stifling defensiveness or anger, try replacing it with nonverbal attention, asking clarifying questions, and paraphrasing the speaker's intent. And remember the positive power of "You're right" and the negative impact of "But."
2. **Paraphrase:** "You're feeling spread thin and unable to plan your work when I say yes to unexpected requests. Did I get that right?"
3. **Ask for Details:** "Can you share an example to help me understand when I added an unplanned, high priority project that interfered with your work flow?"
4. **Guess:** "Is this an example? Last week I agreed to a lastminute grant opportunity and suddenly assigned you an additional, high priority project and nothing left your workload."
5. **Agree with Facts:** "You're right: When this last minute grant opportunity came up, I said yes and then assigned it to you without talking to you about your current priorities or taking anything off of your desk?"
6. **Acknowledge critic's perception:** "Before my new assignment you were feeling stressed but keeping your head above water. Now, it feels like you're sinking and you need my help to clarify and perhaps realign your priorities."
7. **End with an Action Plan:** What are our next steps and what will each of us do? How often should we meet to monitor how we are doing?
8. **The glue of gratitude cements the effort.** Appreciating an employee's candor throughout the conversation brings more reliable feedback. Close the conversation with appreciation: "I want to thank you for offering me information I need to hear. I'm guessing it wasn't easy and I appreciate your courage and perseverance."

Conclusion

Organizations can unlock the power of upward communication by providing systematic training in upstream feedback. In separate sessions, employees learn how to provide candid feedback that

managers receive as kind and helpful, while managers learn to receive that feedback with power listening and systematic follow through. This process proves to employees that their input is appreciated and acted upon. It reveals to managers those often hidden nuggets which allow

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