

Are your employees avoiding you? Managerial strategies for closing the feedback gap

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Executive Overview

When employees perform poorly, they should seek feedback from managers. In return, managers should give constructive feedback to employees, so that they can improve their performance. However, this kind of meaningful exchange about employee performance is often precluded by managers themselves. Some managers have an overly supportive style and feel uncomfortable giving negative feedback. Other managers are intolerant of failure and react harshly to feedback-seeking from poor performers. This causes employees to stop asking for feedback or even to avoid discussing performance with their managers entirely. Some employees, such as those who generally fear negative feedback, will be more likely than others to avoid feedback from their managers, even though it might be helpful. Others will be reluctant to seek feedback because of the potential cost of being perceived as incompetent. These actions of employees and managers can mutually instigate and reinforce one another, creating a vacuum of meaningful exchanges about poor performance. We refer to this phenomenon as the feedback gap. We propose a get-well plan that offers concrete guidelines so that managers can narrow the feedback gap. Our prescription stimulates managers to view feedback about poor performance as a learning opportunity, rather than as a chance to blame others.

One day before the shuttle Columbia broke up over the skies of Texas on February 1, 2003, NASA engineers were engaged in an intense debate by phone and e-mail over potential wing damage from extreme heat, a scenario much like the one investigators believe happened.¹ For some still unclear reasons, the engineers never took the matter to top NASA managers. Similarly, the direct subordinates of authoritarian leader Saddam Hussein were apparently so afraid of bringing him bad news that he did not receive accurate reports of the coalition forces' rapid approach toward Baghdad in the 2003 Iraq War. In the Chinese province of Guangdong, sources have speculated that government officials interfered with information concerning the rapid spread of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), apparently because they might have feared their superiors' reaction.²

In each of the above scenarios, evidence suggests that employees consciously decided to avoid discussing problems with their superiors. Such decisions not to communicate performance concerns

to one's superiors are unlikely to help the organization learn from its mistakes.³ The most basic premise of "learning," in an organizational sense, is "the detection and correction of error";⁴ thus, when employees identify a problem or have a concern about performance, they should engage in feedback-seeking behavior and ask their manager for information or guidance. In that same ideal learning organization, managers provide helpful, constructive feedback when employees perform poorly. Employees, in turn, use such feedback to improve their performance.

As the examples of the shuttle Columbia, Iraq War, and SARS somberly illustrate, employees are not always the active seekers of feedback portrayed in the ideal learning organization.⁵ Particularly in the case of poor employee performance, both managers and employees often neglect to engage in the kind of meaningful and constructive exchanges that lead to improved performance. In the case of managers, this communication failure stems from one or both of the following: a strong

sense of discomfort when giving negative feedback or a lack of tolerance for poor performance and the accompanying emotionally charged reactions. The result is that either no feedback is given or feedback is delivered in a manner which hinders performance improvement. In the case of employees who perform poorly, their failure to seek feedback and their avoidance of negative feedback from the supervisor are motivated by proactive (and yet ill-fated) attempts to not only preserve their self-images, but also manage their impressions on others. As a result, both managers and employees contribute to the phenomenon that we have termed the *feedback gap*.

The feedback gap widens as a result of a spiraling reaction where employee and supervisor reinforce and stimulate each other to neither receive nor give feedback regarding performance. This spiraling reaction perpetuates a corporate culture that precludes organizational learning. We argue that a healthy feedback exchange is key to the learning organization. Indeed, even though the competitive advantage of the learning organization is well understood, the roadmap for creating it is still blurry. To be useful, such a roadmap should do more than sing the praises of organizational learning. It should describe the specific actions that are likely to instigate a healthy feedback exchange among managers and employees. Uncovering those actions implies an understanding of the process through which the feedback gap between its two primary actors, the employee and the manager, narrows or widens. First, we will examine why employees, who often regard their managers as the single most important source of feedback in the workplace,⁶ will sometimes go to great lengths to avoid receiving managerial feedback.

Feedback-Avoiding Behavior (FAB): Dodging the Feedback Bullet

From time to time, employees miss deadlines, deliver a low-quality work product or service, or fail to complete a task. In an ideal scenario, we would expect employees to seek feedback from their managers following an episode of poor performance. The manager would in turn provide helpful and constructive feedback, which the employee would accept and use to get back on the right path. However, there are sometimes costs associated with seeking feedback that outweigh the obvious benefits (see Table 1). A compelling motivation not to seek feedback is that it potentially exposes an employee to various threats to her public reputation and private self-esteem. The employee may fear appearing incompetent in the eyes of her man-

TABLE 1
Employee and Managerial Influences on the Feedback Gap

| Employee Influences | Managerial Influences |
|---|--|
| <p>Costs of FSB</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Threat to self-esteem ● Fear of appearing incompetent to boss ● Fear of ridicule from coworkers ● Fear of admitting weakness <p>FAB temptations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Desire to maintain appearance of consistency ● Desire to manage impressions ● Desire to buy time ● Desire to preserve the ego <p>Personal factors which encourage FAB</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Propensity to seek positive feedback ● Fear of negative evaluation ● High self-esteem ● High concern about public image ● High need for approval | <p>Zero-Tolerant Manager</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low tolerance for failure ● Propensity to make the fundamental-attribution error ● Tendency to react emotionally to bad news ● Psychologically or physically distant from employees <p>Micromanager</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Too physically close to employees ● Fails to delegate ● Obsessed with details ● Propensity to make the false-consensus error ● Takes over ● Expert in finding fault <p>Conflict Avoider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Delays, distorts, and avoids giving feedback ● Uncomfortable with emotional reactions to feedback ● Gives employee the benefit of the doubt ● Nurturing style |

ager. If she asks for information publicly (e.g., in a meeting), she may be subject to ridicule or judgment from either her manager or her coworkers.⁷ In addition, if she has been with the company for a while, she may be apprehensive about seeking feedback, even when she needs it, because she is supposed to "know the ropes."⁸

In addition to the times when employees take a passive stance and simply do not ask for feedback, there are also times when they actively avoid feedback. *Feedback-avoiding behavior* (FAB) occurs when employees use strategies that are designed to either totally avoid their supervisors or divert the supervisor's attention so that their poor performance is not detected and, in turn, they do not receive negative feedback. A recent study has shown that employees engage in FAB 24 per cent of the time following poor performance.⁹ Some examples of FAB tactics follow.

Employees may avoid eye contact with their supervisors in an effort to avoid a more involved interaction. They might refrain from talking with their supervisors to reduce the chances of being

asked about an unfinished project or a missed deadline. The employee may divert conversations with the supervisor away from issues relating to poor performance (i.e., change the subject). The employee may filter the information provided to the manager by highlighting successfully completed tasks while not discussing unsuccessfully completed tasks. Employees may find ways to cover up (i.e. hide, disguise, or otherwise conceal) evidence of poor performance so that it goes undetected by the supervisor. They may make themselves scarce through interpersonal distancing (i.e., hiding, walking the other way, closing their office door). Ultimately, they may withdraw from the working environment through absenteeism, tardiness, or finding excuses to be away from the office. These are proactive avoidance behaviors that allow subordinates to “dodge the feedback bullet” by escaping from scenarios in which they are likely to receive negative feedback.

Why do employees engage in FAB? We argue here that FAB can be motivated by impression management needs, self-preservation needs, or by personality characteristics. Table 1 outlines the motivations for engaging in FAB that are discussed next.

FAB is employed *not* to make oneself appear more positive or competent, like other impression management tactics, but rather to refrain from making known one’s poor performance. Those who infrequently perform poorly may engage in one of the FAB strategies to maintain a consistently positive image. In addition, FAB may buy poor performers the time to correct their mistakes in order to (1) delay the immediate chances of receiving negative feedback and (2) increase the probability of making a positive impression in the future.

But feedback avoidance is not just an outward-directed impression management tactic. It is also a tactic for preserving one’s own self-concept. Most competent individuals have relatively positive self-images.¹⁰ External threats, in the form of negative feedback from managers, can damage internal impressions of competence. Even though negative feedback may be helpful in the long run, it can be initially ego-threatening. Indeed, what we do at work largely defines who we are.¹¹ It is therefore not surprising that we tend to seek out information that is consistent with our positive self-images and avoid information that threatens our self-images.¹² In other words, we will seek feedback when we have performed well and avoid feedback when we have performed poorly.¹³

Does Personality Predict Feedback Avoidance?

Not all employees are equally likely to engage in FAB. A recent study reveals that several individual characteristics can help us predict which employees are likely to avoid feedback from their managers (see Table 1).¹⁴ For example, some individuals are particularly reliant on feedback from others for self-validation. Similarly, some individuals have a strong need to gain the approval of others. They derive positive feelings about themselves by asking for and receiving positive feedback and approval from others, such as their bosses.¹⁵ These individuals are equally likely to avoid negative feedback. That is, those needing constant self-validation are understandably discouraged when they find disapproval. Similarly, individuals who are apprehensive about negative evaluations are more likely than others to avoid negative feedback from their supervisors. In essence, those who are most concerned about the images they project to others are likely to engage in FAB.

The previous paragraph might give the impression that employees’ feedback avoiding and/or their lack of feedback seeking are driven by psychological and personal factors that managers cannot change. We argue that nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it is the manager’s behavior that often determines the cost of feedback seeking for the employee. In the next section, we describe how managers inadvertently encourage their employees to avoid feedback or at least not to actively seek it, thereby creating a spiraling effect that widens the feedback gap.

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Managerial Influences on the F-Gap

A review of the management literature revealed various managerial behaviors that hinder the occurrence of feedback between managers and employees. These individual behaviors, when sorted and combined, led us to create caricatures of three stereotypical managers who are more likely than others to widen the feedback gap. We refer to these as the Zero-Tolerant Manager, the Micromanager, and the Conflict Avoidant Manager. While not all managers fall into one of these three stereotypical categories, readers may recognize some of the characteristics of each caricature in the actions of managers with whom they have worked.

The Zero-Tolerant Manager

Managers who have zero tolerance for failure often react negatively to poor performance or to requests for feedback. The negative emotions provoked by an abrupt manager's reaction to poor performance or to the employee's request for constructive feedback may create a mental record of "what happens around here when one performs poorly and asks for feedback." As a result, employees will prefer not to engage in feedback seeking and will instead choose FAB. A nursing administrator at a children's hospital told us, "Unfortunately, I have a boss that is very unapproachable . . . I avoid her as much as possible, and if I do something wrong, I hope that she does not find out about it." In support of this administrator's concerns, a study found that when employees receive destructive criticism about their performance, they experience such negative emotional reactions (e.g., anger and tension) that they will avoid that source of feedback in the future, and so their performance will be unlikely to improve.¹⁶

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In addition to the destructive reactions of Zero-Tolerant Managers to poor performance, their analysis of the events that led to poor performance is an important determinant of FAB. Psychologically and physically distant from his employees, the Zero-Tolerant Manager is oblivious to the situational factors that contributed to their performance failures and instead attributes poor performance to individual employee characteristics such as laziness, incompetence, or lack of effort. In fact, research has widely documented the so-called fundamental-attribution error, whereby observers are prone to attribute others' failures not to the situation but to flaws in their characteristics or behavior.¹⁷ Prior insensitivity by the manager toward the situational factors that might have contributed to the employee's performance problems is likely to motivate FAB in the future, because the employee now believes that the manager will directly blame him/her while ignoring all other factors possibly contributing to the problem. This feeling of being blamed causes unpleasantness for the employee and creates a motivation to avoid feedback.¹⁸

In addition, their low tolerance for failure influences Zero-Tolerant Managers to react in an explosive manner when poor performance is brought to their attention. They may publicly berate employees in meetings, furthering employee distress following poor performance. A VP of marketing and sales told us, "Discussing mistakes with my boss is never a pleasant task as my boss is the scolding type who does not use psychology or diplomacy when addressing issues. When you make a mistake, he will let you know the old fashioned way, by shouting at you!" The adaptive side of human nature tries to restore a healthy equilibrium by minimizing discomfort after a stressful event. Thus, the more unpleasant and painful the typical feedback session is with their boss, the more likely employees are to avoid feedback.¹⁹

The Micromanager

The Micromanager is also likely to preclude healthy feedback exchanges.²⁰ Consider the case of an executive we will call Joe "M.M." (micromanager), an academically brilliant chemistry Ph.D. at a Fortune 100 pharmaceutical company. His superb technical skills made him a star early in his career. He fully invested himself in detailed investigations of production problems. His search for the source of problems was obsessive, always working late and offering himself as a model of how to problem-solve.

But when Joe "M.M." was selected to head the technical services area for the entire facility, his troubles began. Now responsible for providing leadership, delegating responsibility, and helping to develop employees, Joe "M.M." did not trust that his subordinates were as capable as he was. He failed to delegate power, became obsessed with details instead of providing general guidance, and quickly took over for others when they did not meet his expectations. In his obsession with finding "what people did wrong," Joe "M.M." did not bother explaining the reasons that made such details important. Afraid of not being able to hold their ground in the face of his intense scrutiny, employees hid the real issues from him or took perilous short-cuts to give the false appearance that everything was under control. Employee discontent and turnover did not take long to mount up, and Joe "M.M." was soon terminated.

This type of Micromanager should be complimented on his concern for "detecting and correcting errors," which is a basic tenet of the learning organization. However, he goes about this goal in all the wrong ways. First, he chooses to be physically close to his employees, and yet he remains

psychologically distant from them. That is, he tells them what to do, how to do it, and what they are doing wrong, but he gives them neither the opportunity to develop their own ways of completing the task nor support during the process. He does not consult with them or get their input. He does not develop them because he does not trust that they can do the job as well as he can. He engages in the *false-consensus bias*, which means that he believes that his own way of doing things is correct and then uses this as the standard by which to judge the performance of his employees. If they do not approach the task using his methodology, he attributes their failure to internal characteristics. Instead of giving them developmental feedback, he jumps in and takes over for them. The Micromanager struggles to create an environment of perfectionism that nobody can live up to. Besieged by the Micromanager, employees focus their energies on concealing mistakes rather than on doing their jobs.

The Conflict Avoider

Still another type of manager who contributes to the feedback gap is the Conflict Avoider. Uncomfortable with giving bad news to others, these managers simply avoid giving negative feedback altogether.²¹ In a recent survey of 2,600 American workers, Mercer Human Resource Consulting found that 58 per cent of respondents claim that their supervisors do not give them regular feedback on their performance.²² If avoidance is not an option, the Conflict Avoider may delay giving feedback.²³ This means that when feedback is eventually given, there may be little connection in the employee's mind between the poor performance and the feedback. In the cases of delay and avoidance, the payoff for the manager is that she either totally or temporarily avoids the uncomfortable discussion. The organization, however, pays a high price because the poor performance remains uncorrected for an unnecessarily long time. Finally, Conflict Avoiders may distort feedback so that the poor performance seems less severe than it really is.²⁴ That is, they "water down" the negative feedback, which results in the employee getting a mixed message that fails to convey the seriousness of the performance problem. As a manager at a major public utility shared with us, "I have found that managers tend to be hesitant about giving negative feedback. Managers tend to be polite to a fault. There have been several instances [in my company] when the employee's perception of their performance is nowhere near the perception of the manager."

One explanation for the Conflict Avoider's reticence to give negative feedback involves the kinds of attributions that this type of manager is likely to make. If the manager is convinced that the employee has little control over the situation, he is likely to be more forgiving of the employee's poor performance. Managers are especially likely to feel this way when they perceive that the situation is temporary ("The problem will go away soon, so why bother confronting the employee?").²⁵ Moreover, the Conflict Avoider may be more inclined than other managers to accept the employee's external attributions (i.e., excuses) for failure as a way to avoid the discomfort of providing negative feedback.

It can be said that emotional reactions to feedback always play an important part in the manager's decision to provide feedback, but such emotional reactions seem to be pivotal for the Conflict Avoider. For instance, managers who perceive that the employee's self-concept is likely to be threatened by the feedback, probably because there is a wide gap between the employee's self-perception of competence and the employee's results, may be less inclined to provide it. Those employees who react defensively to negative feedback are difficult for conflict-avoiding managers to handle because they refuse to acknowledge culpability for poor results. In addition, those employees who become emotionally upset when they receive negative feedback make Conflict Avoiders especially uncomfortable. The easiest way out, in both of these cases, is for the manager to avoid giving negative feedback to these employees.

Those employees who react defensively to negative feedback are difficult for conflict-avoiding managers to handle because they refuse to acknowledge culpability for poor results.

Still another explanation for the reluctance to provide feedback is that some conflict-avoiding managers have a "nurturing" style and like to be supportive, no matter what. These managers may be so psychologically close with their employees that they focus on providing support, consolation, and reaffirmation of the employee's competence. This style may be driven by the fact that some managers have a strong need for approval and want to be held in high esteem by their employees. Some evidence suggests that female managers are more likely to delay giving feedback and to positively distort feedback than male managers.²⁶

Many managers, regardless of gender, may feel more comfortable in a nurturing role, and this mindset may push them to provide unconditionally positive feedback, even if it means ignoring serious signs of poor performance.

In sum, different types of managers engage in zero tolerance, micromanagement, or conflict avoidance which, in combination with various employee motivations to avoid feedback, spirals into a mutually reinforcing set of behaviors that widen the feedback gap. The following section describes several specific strategies that managers can use to begin closing the feedback gap.

Managerial Strategies for Closing the Feedback Gap

Through their individual behavior, managers are in the unique position to stimulate individual employees to seek feedback. Here we offer a set of behavioral prescriptions that will help managers surmount the spiraling effects of the feedback gap. The tactics fall into five main categories: (1) investigating potential causes of poor performance, (2) managing physical and psychological distance, (3) engaging in active listening, (4) giving effective, non-threatening feedback, and (5) developing a "learning" mindset for failure. Table 2 outlines the tactics described below, and Table 3 describes how the tactics will specifically help each of the three manager types.

Be Open-Minded About All Potential Causes of Poor Performance

When analyzing poor employee performance, each manager type seems predisposed to a particular attribution bias. The Zero-Tolerant Manager commits the fundamental-attribution error by attributing failure to internal employee characteristics such as lack of effort or lack of ability. The Micro-manager believes that things should be done his way and that there is something wrong with employees who tackle tasks their own way. The Conflict Avoider is overly accepting of employees' external excuses for their poor performance because of her own need to be accepted. While it is normal for most managers, not just the three extremes depicted here, to let their biases taint their feedback behavior, the better manager will take the time to investigate *all* of the potential causes of poor performance before deciding whether, when, and how to deliver feedback.

TABLE 2
Management Tactics for Closing the F-Gap

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Understand All Potential Causes of Poor Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Receive attribution training ● Explore attribution biases ● Ask for employee "accounts" <p>Manage Physical and Psychological Distance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reduce physical distance to understand external causes of poor performance ● Increase physical distance to give decision latitude ● Reduce psychological distance to gain empathy and trust ● Increase psychological distance to gain objectivity <p>Engage in Active Listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be fully attentive to employees when they seek feedback ● Express interest in employee needs ● Verbally summarize employee concerns to ensure understanding ● Verbally acknowledge employee statements | <p>Give Effective, Non-Threatening Feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give task-level and motivational feedback ● Describe poor performance in behavioral terms ● Focus on specific, controllable behavior ● Ask employee for improvement suggestions ● Give negative feedback in private ● Use effective timing ● Compare employee performance to a standard, not to other employees ● Use a feedback script (e.g., DASR) <p>Develop a "Learning" Mindset</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider failure an opportunity to learn ● Dissect failure from a learning perspective ● Capture the learning ● Realize that failure is a by-product of risk-taking and innovation ● Do not tolerate scapegoating |
|--|---|

While it is normal for most managers, not just the three extremes depicted here, to let their biases taint their feedback behavior, the better manager will take the time to investigate all of the potential causes of poor performance before deciding whether, when, and how to deliver feedback.

Given the tendency to let attribution biases affect whether and how we give feedback, managers may attend training sessions that describe biases in causal reasoning processes, so that they can improve their ability to detect causes of poor performance.²⁷ This kind of training should make managers aware of the need to think multi-dimensionally about the causes of poor performance.²⁸ It can also teach managers to distinguish between reliable patterns of poor employee performance

and isolated incidents. For instance, rather than taking for granted the employee's seemingly valid excuses for an incident of poor performance, the manager should consider the "base rate" or frequency with which the employee engages in this kind of perhaps-not-so-unusual occurrence.²⁹ Attribution training can help managers feel more comfortable discussing episodes of poor performance with their employees (see Table 3).

Another tactic for identifying the root causes of poor performance is to seek employee accounts. Zero-Tolerant Managers, instead of relying on their natural tendency to blame employees for poor results, should seek the employee's explanation for the poor results. The Micromanager should take into consideration the possibility that the employee's approach may have merit. By acknowledging and considering the employee's views, the manager creates a perception of fairness.³⁰ While it is natural for the employee to provide self-serving excuses (external attributions) for poor performance, showing consideration gives the manager

a better chance to instill a similarly considerate attitude in the employee throughout the feedback exchange. Supervisors who have had long and close working relationships with employees are more likely to allow employee accounts to influence their perceptions of the causes of poor performance.³¹ In seeking the employee's account of the reasons for poor performance, the manager has potentially learned that there are resources that she can bring to bear in order to reduce the barriers to success.³²

Distance Management

We have said that the Zero-Tolerant Manager tends to make faulty attributions partly due to the lack of time spent with an employee and/or the lack of empathy for the employee's feelings. To reduce the physical distance between themselves and employees, managers can occasionally visit employees in their own work spaces or join them in the field, thereby gaining a better understanding

TABLE 3
Effects of Gap-Closing Strategies on Each Managerial Type

| Management Strategy | Zero-Tolerant Manager | Micromanager | Conflict Avoider |
|---|--|--|---|
| Open mind about causes of poor performance | | | |
| • Attribution training | Understand fundamental-attribution error | Understand false-consensus effect | Understand employees' use of self-serving bias |
| • Seek accounts | Understand possible external reasons for failure | Understand employees' rationale for task strategy | Open up dialogue more comfortably (for manager) |
| Distance Management | Reduce physical distance to understand employee's environment Reduce psychological distance to gain empathy | Increase physical distance to give discretion Reduce psychological distance to gain empathy | Increase psychological distance to gain objectivity |
| Active Listening | Gives manager tools to avoid hasty emotional responses | Allows manager to consider alternative ways to complete tasks | Reduces manager's discomfort by having employee control dialogue |
| Give Effective Feedback | | | |
| • Task or motivational level | Manager avoids attacking the employee | Manager avoids making employee feel inadequate | Manager realizes that negative feedback can be non-threatening |
| • Private | Reduces employee discomfort | Reduces employee discomfort | Reduces manager's discomfort |
| • Well-timed | Wait: Allows manager to check emotions | Wait: Allows employee's task strategy to play out | Give immediately: Maximize impact and reduce chance of losing contingency through delay/avoidance |
| • DASR | Allows manager to express emotions in a non-threatening way | Forces manager to assess whether feedback focuses on task process or task outcome | Manager feels more in control and less uncomfortable with a rehearsed script |
| Develop a "Learning" Mindset | Organization will advance if we embrace failure rather than find scapegoats | Employee will develop more if given discretion to experiment and possibly fail | If we don't directly address failure, we will never improve |

of the external barriers and difficulties that employees encounter in performing their duties. They will then be capable of making a more accurate diagnosis of performance failures, thereby becoming better equipped to help the employee overcome barriers.

Contrary to the Zero-Tolerant Manager, the Micromanager is too physically close to the employee. Spending too much time hovering over the employee and making sure that every detail is handled in a certain way smothers the employee and impedes his development. Our advice for Micromanagers is to increase physical distance and allow employees more discretion. The Micromanager may still maintain control by resorting to outcome as opposed to behavior-oriented controls; that is, focusing on the employee's results instead of being consumed with every tiny employee step in the process.³³

While the Zero-Tolerant Manager and the Micromanager differ in the amount of physical distance they leave between themselves and their employees, they are both guilty of lacking empathy or psychological closeness with their employees. Research shows that decreasing psychological distance not only improves manager-employee relations, but also reduces attribution biases.³⁴ Reducing psychological distance involves developing and demonstrating an understanding of the employee's point of view. It is a communication style that involves open discussion, patience, understanding, and support without dominating the employee.³⁵ It also involves the use of active listening (see next section).

Finally, although seemingly counterintuitive, we recommend that the Conflict-Avoidant Manager consider increasing psychological distance between himself and his employees. Take the case of the new and inexperienced manager of the Math Help lab at a local university. He began having problems when his employees, formerly his co-workers/friends, began missing their scheduled shifts. Because of the psychological closeness he had developed with them when they were his co-workers, he felt uncomfortable in addressing the absenteeism problem. When employees told him that they were skipping their shifts because they had to study for their own exams, he empathized with them because he too was a graduate student. The lab manager felt that giving them negative feedback would cause a loss of friendship. As a result, the Math Help lab had angry customers, particularly at mid-term and final exam time, because of the lack of availability of math tutors.

This manager should have discussed with his subordinates the problems he was facing as a re-

sult of their absenteeism. This conversation would have been from the perspective of a manager trying to solve a business problem and would have solicited their input but would also have been firm about not sacrificing the professionalism of the lab and the necessity of committing to one's scheduled hours. The conversation would have been less "buddy-buddy" and more "here are my needs as the manager of this lab." Our recommendation to increase psychological distance does *not* imply that managers should lose their ability to show empathy. It does mean that they should let their employees know that, as managers, they must strike a balance between their concern for the employee and their concern for results.

Engage in Active Listening

When soliciting employee accounts for poor results, managers must engage in empathetic and active listening, which increases psychological closeness.³⁶ Being an active listener does not mean simply spending time with employees. If managers do not listen effectively, their employees will not feel comfortable discussing barriers to performance and may in fact resort to FAB. Managers can encourage employees to share any issues openly by setting the appropriate tone for communication. To do so, the manager must be attentive, express interest in the employee's needs, express concern for the employee, reflect the sentiments of the employee by restating or summarizing the employee's concerns, and verbally acknowledge the employee's statements.³⁷ These actions can make the employee feel that the manager is really listening. He will therefore feel more comfortable discussing disappointing results and can request the resources or direction necessary for improvement.

Consider for instance the frustration of the WorldCom employee who had built a spreadsheet model predicting Internet growth. He tried to send messages up the chain of command questioning the validity of the Internet growth numbers that were taken for granted, but nobody wanted to hear them. Ignoring this employee's warnings, WorldCom was laying fiber optic cable at a frantic pace to "keep up" with the false expectations of Internet growth. Had his bosses taken the time to actively listen to him and carefully examine his data, they would have acted differently.³⁸

Debby Hopkins, formerly chief financial officer of Lucent until forced out in April 2001, says, "The key thing I've learned is that the most powerful thing you can do is listen. You don't need to have the last word . . . I hold back what I think. I say to myself, 'Not now, not now! Wait, wait!'"³⁹ Hopkins'

insights may be particularly good advice for the Micromanager, whose instincts tell her to intervene with task instructions before her employees have the chance to start the job. "Waiting" is also good advice for the Zero Tolerant Manager, who might benefit from withholding substantive comment or emotional reactions until an employee has had the opportunity to provide a full account of an assignment gone awry.

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Give Effective, Non-Threatening Feedback

Feedback can be given at three primary levels: task, motivational, and self. Failure to provide feedback at the adequate level is one of the reasons why feedback is effective in only one out of three instances.⁴⁰ Task-level feedback focuses on how to perform the job, and it might include guidelines and suggestions. Motivational feedback focuses on stimulating and directing effort to perform the job, and it might include setting goals and deadlines. Self-level feedback deals with general employee attributes, such as telling an employee that he or she is not friendly or sensitive enough. Research suggests that task and motivational feedback are more effective than self-level feedback, which in turn tends to threaten employee self-esteem.⁴¹ Rather than accepting such negative information, the employee is more likely to discount the feedback and subsequently engage in FAB.

When giving feedback, managers should consider the relative merits of comparing the employee's poor performance to an objective standard (i.e. the goal) versus comparing performance to co-worker performance, including the employee's relative strengths and weaknesses.⁴² Contrast the different effects on the employee's self-esteem provoked by comparative statements like "You had the lowest sales in the department. You ranked number 12 out of the 12 salespeople" and goal-oriented statements like "Your goal was \$500k in sales but you only produced \$375k this quarter. One of your strengths is your ability to create a network of loyal customers; let's talk about how you may leverage this strength to generate new sales in your territory." Simply comparing an employee's performance to coworkers' performance invites the employee to focus on his seemingly insurmountable inadequacies, rather than on the

inadequate task-level strategy or lack of motivation that led to the sub-par results.

To avoid falling into the feedback-gap trap, managers are generally better off providing task and motivational feedback which not only is specific and descriptive but also focuses on controllable behavior, not on hard-to-change personal characteristics. The manager must describe the problematic behavior and how this behavior affects the results or the organization. The manager may say, for example, "When most of your attention is focused on maintaining current accounts and not enough time is spent developing new business, the company is not able to improve market share in your territory." This is quite different from saying, "You are lazy and don't want to work" even though the manager may have these thoughts.

The feedback from the manager may also specify guidelines regarding possible replacement behaviors such as "I would like to see you spend 50 per cent of your time on old accounts and 50 per cent of your time developing new accounts." The manager could show consideration and say, "Can you think of some strategies which you could use to add new clients?" or "Are there any resources that I can provide to help you build your client base?" These comments may lead to a discussion during which tactics to improve performance are identified.

The reader may notice that in the description of the feedback exchange above, the manager followed a specific script often referred to as "DASR"—"Describe, Acknowledge, Specify, and Reaffirm."⁴³ This feedback strategy has been used in family counseling as well as in manager training programs. It gives participants an easy-to-follow script that eases the pain of giving negative feedback. The idea is to first *describe* the specific behavior the employee performed (e.g. "You have been late to 5 of the last 6 weekly staff meetings."). Next, the feedback giver *acknowledges* how the behavior affects him or how it affects the team/organization (e.g., "When you arrive late to our weekly staff meetings, I have to repeat the information you missed, and this is not a good use of my time or the time of the other members of our team"). Then, the manager *specifies* the general parameters of a replacement behavior (e.g., "I would really appreciate it if you would make a concerted effort to make it to our meetings on time. We start promptly at 8:00 a.m."). Finally, the manager *reaffirms* the value of the employee and his/her contribution (e.g. "You are a valued member of this team, and we need your input when we meet together each week.").

For the Zero-Tolerant Manager, the feedback

script provides a vehicle for the manager to focus on the behavior, rather than on the person. Taking a few minutes to rehearse the script gives the manager the opportunity to diffuse his emotions, think about the message he really wants to send to the employee, and increase his self-confidence.⁴⁴ While rehearsing the script, the Micromanager should evaluate whether or not she is giving feedback at the appropriate time in the task cycle. In thinking about how she will describe the problem behavior to the employee, the Micromanager should determine whether her feedback is about the *outcome* of the employee's behavior or about the *process*. For the Conflict-Avoidant Manager, the rehearsed script provides a stronger sense of control over the feedback interaction. One executive who recently employed the technique for the first time told us, "As I prepared for the discussion, I felt somewhat awkward rehearsing what I was going to say. However, once we started talking, I knew exactly where I was going, and that allowed me to maintain a level and assured tone." Managers will realize that feedback delivered in this manner provokes a more open and accepting reaction from the recipient, rather than a defensive reaction.

Another factor that managers should consider in giving effective feedback is *privacy*. First, the mere presence of others tends to increase evaluation apprehension,⁴⁵ and therefore negative feedback is best given in private. A physical therapy manager told us, "If my boss were more understanding and involved, I am sure my behavior would be different. I would share my failures and feel comfortable asking for advice. This is not the situation. If a failure is recognized, it is brought up at almost every meeting. It's a very demeaning situation." This scenario demonstrates that when managers publicly scold employees in the presence of others, employees will engage in their best FAB to prevent the manager from finding out about poor performance. The manager should consider taking the time to pull employees to the side and give them feedback in private. Employees wish to preserve their dignity and self-esteem by having negative feedback delivered privately, as evidenced by one of the managers we interviewed who told us, "As for sub-par performance, I am grateful when my superiors take the time to point out these instances; they are a learning opportunity. Of course, I prefer to be told privately . . . because the respect of my peers is important to me." Even if the Zero-Tolerant Manager and the Micromanager used no other tactic mentioned here, this one would save them and their employees the embarrassment of giving and receiving harshly delivered feedback

in public. For the Conflict-Avoidant Manager, giving feedback in private will not only reduce employee discomfort but his own discomfort as well. However, when discussing extreme cases of poor performance leading to termination, legal advantages may be derived from having a witness present. Legal concerns should be balanced with managerial ones, because the presence of a witness may be perceived as a veiled threat, thereby raising the barrier to open communication.

Negative feedback is best given in private.

Still another way to avoid the feedback gap is to make sure negative feedback is well timed. Generally, this means providing feedback immediately after the behavior occurs. This way, there is a connection between the behavior and the consequence, and therefore a greater probability that the employee will change the behavior. The time connection is important for the Conflict Avoider, who runs the risk of losing impact by providing feedback after a long delay, if at all. One exception to this rule pertains to the Zero-Tolerant Managers, whose inability to hold their tempers in check may lead them to discharge prompt yet unproductive feedback.⁴⁶ In these cases, managers should wait until they are calm, collected, and able to provide constructive feedback. The Micromanager would be well advised to resist the temptation to jump in when he sees that the employee is performing a task in a manner different from the one he would have used. Unless the employee's approach deviates from an approved standard operating procedure, is too risky, or is too costly, the manager should wait to give feedback until he observes the employee's end result. At that point, if the results are poor, the manager can provide task-level feedback, explaining how a different strategy would work better. In any case, the feedback should not be so far removed from the behavior that the connection is lost and the learning opportunity foregone.

Develop a "Learning" Mindset

Failure is a normal outcome when one takes risks and attempts to innovate. Failure allows for the examination of processes and practices that may otherwise go unchallenged, thereby facilitating continuous improvement. Failure provides the opportunity to do an "autopsy" of key decisions, resource allocations, strategies, and processes,

which may ultimately lead to better results. Unfortunately, failure too often leads members of organizations to direct their energy toward identifying scapegoats or avoiding confrontation rather than examining the causes and learning from the experience. It is the latter that prevents the widening of the feedback gap. This learning mindset must be visible at every managerial level in the organization.

Top management first needs to open the doors to failure analysis by reinforcing a learning-oriented reaction to failure through clear, consistent messages and reward systems. Consider, for instance, the manner in which top management at General Electric handled the commercial failure of the Halarc, a new light bulb that lasted ten times longer than the typical product at a fraction of the energy.⁴⁷ The problem was that in the late 1970s nobody was eager to pay \$10.95 for a single light bulb! So, the product was a flop. Jack Welch's management team decided to reward and promote some members of the Halarc team to send a loud message that risk-taking, even if things did not go as planned, was welcomed. In a similar account, a top executive at Intel, an organization known for innovation, threw big "failure of the month" dinners for those groups that took the biggest risks but suffered the biggest failures.⁴⁸

Many organizations have adopted this approach to confronting failure and have diffused it throughout the organization. One of the most visible examples is Microsoft. Though Microsoft is well known for having a demanding culture in which employees are given assignments which stretch them far beyond their experience, the company is also known for promoting people who have managed failed projects. According to a popular Harvard Business School case which is used in many MBA classrooms, the thinking behind this practice is, "If you fire the person who failed, you're throwing away the learning."⁴⁹ According to one Microsoft manager we interviewed, "It is not difficult for me to discuss mistakes. I believe this happens because I am very self-critical, and one of our company values is being self-critical. We are prompted to ask why or why not, we view each experience as an opportunity for learning, and we are encouraged to provide direct, thoughtful feedback on strengths and weaknesses. Since my values are so similar to Microsoft values, I feel very committed and safe as an employee in sharing my failures and successes." When managers adopt this mindset, feedback emerges as a critical resource for continuous organizational learning available to employees and managers.

The results of a recent study support the idea

that organizational learning occurs in the trenches. It appears that there is wide variability among work groups within the same organization regarding their shared beliefs about how to address failure. Specifically, work teams that believed in encouraging members to discuss mistakes openly, evaluate ways to prevent them, address differences of opinion, and communicate errors to the appropriate people achieved greater results than those teams that covered up mistakes, did not openly discuss mistakes as a group, and avoided discussing differences of opinion. Further, the study found that teams with leaders who deliberately refocused employees' traditional view of failure (as something shameful and to be avoided) to the contemporary view (failure is essential to innovation and success) were more likely to share the learning-oriented beliefs about failure that led to better performance.⁵⁰ Through their frequent repetition, these beliefs and behaviors will be learned by and taught to new members as the accepted way to think about, feel, and handle performance feedback, thereby giving birth to the organizational routines and shared meaning that characterize the culture of a learning organization.⁵¹

Organizational learning occurs in the trenches.

Avoiding the NASA Syndrome

On one occasion during his tenure with NASA during the 1960s and 1970s, famous chief scientist Wernher von Braun sent a bottle of champagne to an engineer who admitted that he might have inadvertently short-circuited the Redstone missile which went out of control during pre-launch testing. A subsequent investigation revealed that the engineer was right. As a result of the engineer's voluntary disclosure, an expensive missile redesign was avoided.⁵²

Let us imagine that this engineer, instead of reporting to von Braun, worked for a stereotypical Zero-Tolerant Manager, a Micromanager, or a Conflict Avoider. Being afraid of the abrupt reaction of the Zero-Tolerant Manager, the engineer would probably have hidden his mistake. If working for a Micromanager, the engineer would probably have been busy erasing all traces of his mistake from his superior, so that he would not have to suffer even closer supervision in the future. The engineer might have abused his personal relationship with his Conflict-Avoiding Manager by arguing that friends do not blow the whistle on each other, or that the short-circuit problem was due to factors beyond the engineer's control.

We would have applied some of our prescriptions and advised the Zero-Tolerant Manager to invest his energy in working closer with the employee, listen to his account of the events, and remain open-minded about external factors beyond the employee's control. Our recommendations to the Micromanager would have included getting to know her engineers a bit better, trusting them more, and leaving them some room to do their job. We would have advised the Conflict Avoider to be more assertive, to learn to respect his job as much as he respects his engineers' feelings, and to become more comfortable with the process of delivering feedback.

Unfortunately, it appears that the legacy of von Braun's management style has not survived the passage of time. The final, official report on the space shuttle Columbia accident stated that a number of organizational cultural traits contributed to the loss, including "organizational barriers that prevented effective communication of critical safety information and stifled professional differences of opinion."⁵³

While most of us do not work in organizations for which product failures produce such dire results, it is indeed still difficult to overcome the fear and personal cost of acknowledging one's own mistakes. Career trajectories hang in the balance in today's rapidly changing workplace. Consequently, managers fear losing credibility for admitting mistakes, and employees fear appearing incompetent following an episode of poor performance. While there is much more to the "learning organization" than effective feedback-seeking and feedback-giving, we believe that the suggestions provided here will go a long way toward helping managers embrace feedback as a precious opportunity to correct performance problems while they can still be corrected.

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