

Do all conversations have to be uncomfortable?

No, they don't! It is important to acknowledge the work your employees do for you. Traditionally, employees have been performance managed once a year, and these performance appraisal sessions are notorious for causing anxiety. Today, the way employees are performance managed has changed significantly. Managers have realised the importance of communicating regularly and informally with their employees about how they are performing, which creates an open and collaborative culture, where everyone feels happy.

However, some leaders may feel that they cannot provide genuine feedback because they feel that being candid with staff would conflict with being nice, respectful and warm. The potential consequences are that the team does not perform at their best or they miss out on opportunities to improve themselves and the organisation's overall impact.

What might be holding you back from giving honest feedback?

- Trying to spare colleagues' feelings due to concern they could be hurt or upset with critical feedback.
- Fear of making a mistake, if your organisation expects managers to be poised and professional at all times. It takes time to learn how to effectively deliver feedback and mistakes could be perceived as disrespectful or unprofessional.
- If your leaders and role models are constantly positive and warm, they may leave out modelling ways to provide negative feedback.
- Managers may have pride in their organisation's 'nice' culture and this may have been part of what attracted them to the organisation, thus they may reject anything that appears to threaten this culture.

To overcome these blocks to providing feedback here are 7 steps to follow:

1. Begin by looking in the mirror

Quoting Michael Jackson, *"I'm starting with the man (or woman) in the mirror, and I'm asking him (or her) to make a change"*. Therefore start by showing your team that you're committed to shifting the culture of avoiding feedback by first doing the hard work yourself.

In practical terms, this means committing to being more candid with your team, creating a plan for how this might happen, and then sharing your plan with staff, and asking for feedback on it.

2. Request feedback about yourself – then really listen to it

Feedback can be high-level questions such as, "What could I be doing better as a manager?" as well as "micro" feedback, such as asking how you could have handled a meeting or conversation. Then, make sure you listen without becoming defensive or explaining. Take in what was said and thank the person for their candour – you can decide what parts of their feedback to act on down the track.

3. Concentrate on being helpful, not on venting

Being more candid in your organisation doesn't give you license to vent, 'get things off your chest' or say whatever you feel in the moment. The aim here is to help your team member to develop and be more effective at their job, not to make yourself feel better.

4. Welcome the discomfort and slip-ups

Make no mistake: learning to be open, honest and frank will be uncomfortable to start with. As when learning other new skills, you'll make mistakes, work out what they were, and then try again. But take heart that you'll improve over time.

You might also unintentionally create misunderstandings, hurt feelings and other kinds of conflict. Discomfort and mistakes mean you're doing something right, so don't expect to skip this stage.

5. Own up to your mistakes

While making mistakes is unavoidable, brushing them under the carpet and ignoring their impact on others is not – it's unprofessional and unkind. Own up to mistakes, explain your intent and apologise for any confusion or upset caused.

Aside from the immediate benefit of cleaning up the blunder, you'll send a loud message to those within your team that, like anyone else, managers make mistakes and apologise for them.

6. Know when to keep things to yourself

Sometimes, being upfront isn't the appropriate course of action. For instance, avoid giving feedback at times when:

- You're looking to place blame;
- You're emotional, hungry, angry, lonely or tired;
- It's focused on personality, not offending behaviour;
- It's based on second-hand information; or
- You've already given a substantial amount of feedback recently.

7. Accept that improvement is continuous.

Pay attention to and learn from what you're doing well, as well as any instances in which you find yourself venting, avoiding honesty or delivering feedback clumsily. Analyse these occurrences and develop strategies to improve, remembering that it's an ongoing process. You'll never reach an "end" – but you'll get better over time. While improving your feedback skills can be difficult, you'll better serve your team by being completely honest with them – while still retaining your ability to be kind and approachable.

Need more information, speak to our Employment Relations Advisors on (07) 3852 5177.