



How Did You Go With That?

I promised to follow up last month's column on delegation with a column on feedback. Feedback is so important if the learning experience – for both Delegator and Learner – is to be valuable. Quality feedback requires good quality communication if the messages are going to be successfully transmitted and received. Again I will use the terms Delegator and Learner for ease of reference, conscious that feedback takes place in other circumstances and confident that clever readers will be able to translate accordingly. Let's look at the responsibilities for the Delegator:

Praise

Let's say that the Delegator's first instinct is to praise the Learner. I suggest that the test of whether praise really hits the mark is whether it is genuinely accepted by the Learner and whether it results in repeated praise-worthy behaviour. My first recommendation is that the praise be specific. For example, "I liked the way you structured the draft report with clear headings and a logical flow" rather than "Good work with the report". My second recommendation is that praise is not diluted, in any way, with any comment that could be perceived as negative. For example, if the previous example is immediately followed with "...but you really should use the spell-checker" what is the Learner most likely to remember? This is really important! If the praise is just a softener for appropriate criticism, leave it out. If the praise is justified then highlight it clearly. If criticism is warranted, make it a very separate point so that the two are not confused or forgotten.

Criticism

If the Learner needs to learn from the experience then the Delegator must point out any concerns that arise. Just as some people are not comfortable giving praise, some are not comfortable giving criticism. Both are vital elements of the feedback and you are doing the Learner a disservice by remaining silent – with your discomfort dishonestly rationalised by "Well, they're only new". In delivering the criticism please focus on the task not the person. One way is to avoid the "you" word. For example, "I found the spelling in this report to be inconsistent" rather than "Your spelling is inconsistent". You can emphasise your intention to assist the Learner by offering assistance next time. A simple question like, "How can I help with this aspect?" may suffice.

Message Received?

When the Delegator is wrapping up the conversation it would be helpful to confirm that the Learner has actually understood the feedback. In all the excitement of praise and criticism it is easy for the Learner to misinterpret the Delegator's messages. Hence, the Delegator might test the Learner's conclusions. Something like, "What have I tried to convey today?" is much better than "Any questions?" or "Do you understand what I have told you?".

Feedback is a critical skill – and it takes practice to deliver it and receive it successfully.