

Training & Development

To Fill the Feedback Void

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That many executives function in a feedback void is understandable. Early in their careers, they tend to receive glowing performance appraisals. As they climb the corporate ladder, the flow of feedback ebbs. By the time they reach the Ivory Tower, the feedback well has dried up. The people above them are busy with big-picture planning and don't take the time to discuss performance issues. And the people below them don't feel comfortable offering criticism.

That's how the feedback void is created.

The void becomes particularly critical for managers who have become less effective as they've moved up the corporate ladder. The skills that made some rising executives effective as middle managers can actually become drawbacks as they move up. For example, a detail-oriented person may flourish at lower- and middle-management levels, because the focus in those jobs is on day-to-day activities. But at the top-management level, attention to detail may appear over-controlling. The people who work for a micro-manager may feel distrustful and disempowered.

But without feedback, the manager may not even realize that there's a problem.

A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

Some executives actively seek feedback. But many don't. The ones who risk negative feedback tend to be star performers; those who avoid feedback because it may be negative tend to be mediocre managers. There are ways to embrace negative feedback as an opportunity to become one's best. And there are ways to give negative feedback without being harsh.

Learning how to give and receive feedback successfully requires a strong commitment to change. It also requires strong coaching. One effective method uses a survey that combines three feedback tools:

- a 360-degree assessment customized to measure specific problem areas
- the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument
- 16 Personality Factors, a test designed to be administered by a licensed psychologist. (For more information, contact the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, Box 1188, Champaign, IL 61824-1188; 800/225-IPAT.)

Most training and development professionals are familiar with the

MBTI instrument. (For information contact Consulting Psychologists Press, Box 10096, Palo Alto, CA 94303; 800/624-1765.) See the section at the end for examples of the items included in the other two tools.

Start by sending the survey to 25 to 40 people who work with each executive who is to receive feedback—including his or her manager, peers, direct reports, and "high-potentials" (people who are likely to advance in the ranks). It's also a good idea to interview six to 10 people who work closely with each executive, in order to examine more closely the specific behaviors associated with the ratings.

After analyzing the surveys, meet with each executive for a half-day. Together, the surveys and meetings help pinpoint areas that need attention.

For example, someone may score high in intuitiveness on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument and low on risk-taking on the 16 Personality Factors test. The 360-degree assessment may show that other people don't consider the executive to be especially creative. Interpreting the three analyses combined, you might conclude that the executive has some good ideas but is afraid to experiment. He or she wants things to be perfect at the outset and is reluctant to pursue ideas that will have to be tested and refined.

Feedback usually contains both confirmations and surprises. It can confirm strengths that an executive already knew about; it can also

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confirm an executive's belief that he or she needs development in certain other areas. The surprises generally involve strengths that the executives are underutilizing and development areas that they have misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Some people accept the feedback openly; others become defensive. Work with the executives until they accept the accuracy and

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importance of the feedback. Sometimes that occurs in the initial feedback session; other times, it takes several meetings. The length of time it takes an executive to accept the validity of the feedback may depend on the degree to which he or she has resisted similar feedback in the past.

After the initial feedback session, it's a good idea to continue meeting with each executive for three to six months. Your clients may come to regard you as similar to a piano teacher: They know that they had better practice before your next visit.

The first four follow-up sessions concentrate on assessing the executive's leadership and management skills and on identifying areas in which they need development. The next five sessions focus on coaching and counseling to help ensure that the executives make the recommended changes. In each session, the emphasis is on shifting the executive's attitudes and beliefs, paving the way for observable changes in his or her management style.

In one of the sessions, try meeting with the executive and his or her manager. This is a good time to discuss the manager's concerns. With your assistance, the executive presents the feedback results and a development plan, in order to gain the manager's buy-in and support. This approach fosters open and honest communication to help ensure that, in the future, small problems don't become big ones.

The executives also meet with each of their direct reports—and, sometimes, with their peers—to summarize the feedback and discuss ways of using it. This helps demonstrate to subordinates the executives' commitment to change.

Through this process, a new openness replaces the hinting-and-hoping philosophy. The executives learn to confront problems early on. They learn to communicate with each other better and to become more comfortable giving feedback to their direct reports. Their new attitudes and approaches send a positive message throughout the organization.

As executives enrich their own performance, they also contribute to their company's bottom line. Many of the executives say their personal growth has had a positive effect on their companies' profits. As their

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work relationships grew stronger and they learned to complement each other's strengths, they helped hone their company's competitive edge.

16 PERSONALITY FACTORS TEST

Here are some of the factors measured on the test, along with

explanations of what high and low scores indicate.

- **Social Orientation.** A high score indicates that the person is cooperative and concerned. A low score indicates that the person interacts with others poorly.
- **Dominance.** A high score indicates that the person has a need for control. A low score indicates that the person doesn't stand up for his or her own needs.
- **Cheerfulness.** A high score indicates that the person is optimistic and enthusiastic. A low score indicates that the person is a careful thinker who fears making mistakes.
- **Boldness.** A high score indicates that the person takes risks and has a high tolerance for rejection. A low score indicates that the person is adverse to taking risks.

EXECUTIVE 360-DEGREE ASSESSMENT

Here are some items included on a 360-degree feedback instrument. Respondents are to indicate whether the person exhibits them.

VISION AND STRATEGY

- Creates an inspired mission and a sense of core purpose, based on a clear vision for the future.
- Makes the vision real to managers and other employees.
- Communicates a view of the future so compelling that others are drawn to follow.
- Develops breakthrough strategies and tactical plans to take advantage of future trends and market changes.

INNOVATION AND CHANGE

- Leads the way in creating new approaches. Stimulates new thinking in goals, technologies, business conditions, organizational structures, and people.
- Goes beyond current thinking to seek new perspectives and different ways of doing things. Challenges old techniques and strategies. Explores different options before making a decision.
- Manages successfully in an ambiguous and changing environment. Initiates effective action in unstructured situations.

COLLABORATION

- Helps businesses work together to meet goals and solve problems.
- Actively works with the executive team to create a positive, optimistic and cooperative work environment.

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- Uses appropriate interpersonal and management styles to work with others. Varies approach with different people and situations.

COACHING

- Accurately identifies strengths and development needs in others. Coaches others in the development of their skills and stimulates them to make changes and improvements.
- Deals promptly and directly with performance that is below expectations. Confronts issues before they worsen.

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

- Knows her or his own personal strengths, weaknesses, and limits. Seeks feedback to improve performance and to make any necessary changes.
- Takes responsibility for problems rather than making excuses or blaming others.
- Can be counted on to hold things together during tough times.

Contact info@worthethic.com or refer to www.worthethic.com for more information.

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Kate, a widely recognized executive coach, speaker and author, founded Worth Ethic Corporation in 1988. Her BS in engineering and PhD in psychology give her a unique approach when working with analytical, data-oriented executives, who want to expand their emotional intelligence and create company cultures where people perform at their peak. Kate has worked with over 1,000 senior executives in a wide range of industries. She has coached executives globally on all major continents.

Previously, she was vice president of human resources for a high-tech Silicon Valley company. Her books include *The Worth Ethic*, *Earn What You're Worth*, *The Corporate Mystic* (now in its 11th printing).



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