

COLLABORATION

How to Make Feedback Feel Normal

by Joseph Grenny

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Laura Schneider for HBR

I've spent much of my career teaching people how to have "crucial conversations." In the work place, most crucial conversations are about feedback - the process of helping others improve by pointing out deficiencies in their behavior or work. I've realized lately that a lot of my work could have been avoided if leaders had understood one simple thing:

The primary reason people struggle with giving and receiving feedback is not a lack of proficiency but of frequency.

I learned this in a surprising way. Over the past year I've watched a group of 50 criminals, hard core drug addicts and homeless people start three highly successful companies. The first was a moving company – called The Other Side Movers. All 50 are part of a 2-year program called The Other Side Academy – or TOSA. The majority of the students at TOSA are there as an alternative to incarceration. Some were facing prison sentences decades in length. Instead, they are now living in a large historic home running businesses as a way to learn a new way of living. I serve as a board member of The Other Side Academy.

Within six months of starting The Other Side Movers, they paid off their first moving truck and purchased two more. Business will exceed \$1 million in the first year. Even more impressive, they catapulted to the top of every referral site to become the #1 ranked moving company in their area. Customers sound like they are describing high-end spa services rather than movers. One typical review effuses: “Wow. This is the best customer experience I've ever had... These guys are true heroes!”

And their other two businesses are off to a similar start.

So how do they do it? How have a group of society's castoffs come to dominate in each of their business undertakings?

At The Other Side Movers, feedback is normal.

Having spent a great deal of time urging people to improve the impact of their feedback by improving its packaging, I've been humbled to discover that we ought to spend more time increasing frequency rather than improving delivery.

A core value at The Other Side Movers is “200% Accountability.” Meaning every employee is expected to be 100% accountable for the quality of their own work, AND 100% accountable for the quality of the work of everyone else they see. The quickest way to get in trouble at The Other Side Movers is not to fail on #1, but on #2.

Here's are three ways The Other Side Movers makes feedback normal:

It's a regular ritual rather than an occasional blast. Let's face it, not many of us look forward to giving and receiving feedback. In fact, if we could get away with doing it every five years, we'd probably prefer it that way. Feedback at The Other Side Movers is given daily in two ways.

- One is through “pull ups.” If you see someone doing something wrong, you are obligated to immediately “pull them up.” Then pass the information about the mistake to a crew leader. You don't delve into detail during the pull up - you simply offer corrective feedback. The person receiving the feedback is encouraged to simply respond with “okay.” The vast majority of this kind of feedback is delivered by peers – sometimes even by a junior peer pointing out a problem to a more senior one.
- The second is Games. Twice a week all employees sit in a circle and play “The Game.” The Game is a peer-driven process of bringing feedback to those you care enough about to help them improve. That doesn't mean it is a love-fest. It can get loud and raucous. Feedback recipients are often defensive. But as other members of the group add their perspective to the feedback you're given, you find it less tenable to deny the concerns - and eventually find the humility to embrace what your colleagues are telling you. The very frequency of Games – not the quality of delivery – lowers the emotional stakes over time to where team members become comfortable hearing difficult truths.

Patch up after you pull up. The biggest predictor of whether people become defensive when presented feedback is not the elegance of the delivery – but the motive behind it. New team members at The Other Side Movers are instructed that their primary job is to help their brothers and sisters change their lives. That's why they must hold them accountable. If they “play the game” to simply vent their own frustration – they're doing it selfishly. And if that's their motive, others will be less likely to listen. After giving someone a tough “pull up” team members are taught to offer a “patch up.” Patching up means helping them know they are cared about and respected. I've never seen more love expressed in any setting in my life than I have in Games. I've also never heard more cursing in any similar space of time. That they both happen in the same meeting is the reason feedback works at The Other Side Movers.

Groups do it better. Everyone knows that defensiveness is the antibody of feedback. When managers in most workplaces meet with employees one-on-one, even the best prepared feedback can ricochet off deaf ears. The recipient has all manner of extenuating circumstances and cogent arguments with which to explain it away. The reason so little of this feedback gets through is that most of those who experienced the problem caused by the employee's actions aren't in the room.

This doesn't happen at The Other Side Movers. Here, those who saw it say it. They're all in The Game with you. Defensiveness often flares temporarily, but it is promptly smothered into irrelevance by a cloud of expert witnesses – the ones who were directly affected by what you did or did not do.

For example, customers of The Other Side Movers are stunned at the impeccable courtesy such an unusual group of characters show them. I learned why as I watched a team address a very sensitive issue during Games.

In the midst of the Game, one team member turned to a colleague and yelled, "Rick" (not his real name), "why were you staring at that woman's body today?" (I cleaned up the exact allegation).

Rick flushed red. "I was not." He shot back.

"The hell you weren't. You were sitting there checking her out while her back was turned. It made me sick. You put us all at risk. We have a reputation and you could throw it all away by acting like a creep. Knock it off!"

Rick still looked defiant. Until three other team members spoke up. By the third, Rick's shoulders slumped. He said, "I'm sorry. Yeah, I do that. I'll stop." And the Game moved to the next employee.

The culture at The Other Side Movers – and other businesses of The Other Side Academy – is not for everyone. Some walk out after the first game. And clearly companies with more "sophisticated" employees might struggle with the raw form of the feedback offered at The Other Side Movers. But I'm convinced they're onto something.

My research over the past 30 years has shown that you can largely predict the health of an organization by measuring the average lag time between identifying and discussing problems. At The Other Side Movers that lag time is as close to zero as I've ever seen. And the results speak for themselves.



Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.

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
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Matthew Nachtrab 5 months ago

Giving feedback as a group where everyone gets feedback is brilliant. As a leader, I am frequently hearing colleagues vent about each other and historically, I do one of two things. I talk to the colleague and try to coach and mentor without throwing the venter under the buss. Or I tell them to work it out between them selves. Historically, these approaches take forever to resolve the underlying issue. Group executed peer based feedback on a regular basis in a tight leadership team seriously simplifies my role as a leader of a team. I will put this idea to work.

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