



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

INTERPERSONAL TECHNIQUES FOR LEADERS

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Providing both positive and negative feedback to subordinates is an extremely important managerial responsibility, because it guides individuals, teams, and organizations toward success. Yet, most managers, if they provide feedback at all, provide it badly.

Where Counseling Fits

The best feedback is straightforward, honest, and specific, and it is rooted in behavior. In contrast, poor feedback is vague, evasive, or hostile (involving a criticism of a person rather than of the person's behavior). Honest, specific feedback creates an opportunity for positive development. Hostile feedback causes resentment, which precludes the creation of a climate in which a developmental conversation of development can take place. A manager's feedback should inform or teach a subordinate. Critical

Note: This chapter shows how some techniques used in life counseling may be usefully brought into a coaching context. Those managers who are not also qualified psychologists should never attempt to apply these techniques outside the agenda of work-related coaching.

evaluations should be structured in a constructive way, giving the person the information he or she needs to make changes.

Coaching involves telling people specifically what they are doing well and what they are doing badly in areas limited to their work. Once a manager has communicated the problem and what improved performance would look like, both parties form an expectation of the future. *Counseling*, on the other hand, engages people with issues that are deeply important to them and about which they hold strong feelings. These issues may go beyond the work situation and are often large and difficult to define.

The advantages to counseling include: (1) the client presents the problem to the counselor—in contrast to the work situation, in which the employee may feel there is no problem or the manager and employee may disagree about the issues; and (2) a qualified counselor is present with diagnostic and communication skills—whereas workplace situations may become very “touchy,” because one or both parties are uncomfortable talking about the issues or don’t want to listen.

It is naturally more comfortable and less intimidating for managers and subordinates to discuss work issues rather than personal issues, but profound emotions also frequently affect work performance. When this is true, the emotions and any personal issues behind them should also be addressed and resolved. Managers may find any of the following situations among subordinates:

- Emotional impact of divorce on their work;
- Impact of drug or alcohol abuse on work;
- Work implications from a child in trouble;
- A mid-life crisis;
- Unrealistic expectations;
- Fear of retirement;
- Poor interpersonal skills; or
- A work plateau.

Any of these situations is likely to have both a life component and a work-related component.

Effective Counseling

Counseling is effective when it results in people changing their perceptions, attitudes, and behavior to solve their problems and improve their lives. Good employee counseling requires a manager to have an open attitude, good communication skills, and an understanding that the issue under discussion may only be the tip of an underlying problem.

People's thoughts and feelings often seem contradictory and inconsistent when important and sensitive issues are involved, so counselors have to listen well and concentrate on what is being said in order to ask the questions that will lead to insight on the part of the person being counseled. The manager-counselor's goal is to enable the employee to see alternatives and choices and to make good decisions.

To be an effective counselor you must understand yourself, your own values, and any obstacles that may hinder your progress. An effective counselor does not react emotionally or defensively, nor is he or she afraid of others' emotions. Expressed emotions are clues; they provide data and insight into another's outlook. As an effective counselor, you must not become emotionally involved. Of course, you may feel compassion, pity, sadness, irritation, or even anger, but it is imperative not to be vulnerable to the content of the problem or feel responsibility for the problem. As counselor, your goal is to be appropriately objective. Do not be so involved as to respond emotionally, but be empathic enough to feel sensitively.

Emotion and Miscommunication

The most difficult conversations are those in which there is a great deal of emotion, because emotion increases the chance that messages will be obscured or distorted. When there is a lot of emotion—either because of the nature of the relationship or because of the content of the message—there is a good chance that the message will be distorted by one or both parties. People tend to highlight and remember the positive and forget or exaggerate the negative.

Misperceptions and miscommunications often occur because people prefer to avoid uncomfortable emotional situations. People may not want intimate information about how someone else feels and they may also be reluctant to expose how they feel. The paradoxical result of these tendencies is that when the need to communicate well is high, the probability of not communicating well escalates.

Counseling requires more awareness, sensitivity, and skill than does coaching, because it addresses significant, underlying issues that are deeply personal and grounded in emotion. It is crucial that communication be accurate, relevant, and comprehensive. Because the very significance of the situation makes communication difficult, managers must be taught the following eight skills, appropriate components of counseling, to use in real-world situations.

Eight Skills of Counseling

One: Establish Rapport and Stay Calm

Establishing rapport means creating a mood for the dialogue that is about to take place—to create a sense of comfort so the other person is willing to listen and talk. Begin by taking the time to make sure both of you are at ease.

You will feel more comfortable if you are physically relaxed. You will want to master a breathing or relaxation technique to use when you must remain calm with an emotional or upset employee. You can start to create rapport in the usual verbal ways by which we make people feel welcome. Create contact non-verbally: smile and look at the person, keep your posture open, and lean gently toward the other person. Demonstrate your interest by facing the other person and maintaining eye contact.

The goal of rapport is to create a mood in which trust leads to real communication. Rapport is the result of your being ready to listen and to respond. You may have called the meeting because you are upset or displeased, but you must refrain from making the other person feel defensive. Don't prejudge. Your objective is for both of you to learn. With rapport, the mutuality of your relationship is emphasized. Only after rapport has been established will you be ready to move to the content of the dialogue.

Two: Listen and Ask Responsive Questions

The key to counseling, *active listening*, involves more listening than talking. Active listening also requires concentration and energy, because you must actively think about what you hear. First, focus completely on the other person. You do not have to agree with him or her, but you must concentrate on what the person says and does, without thinking about what you want to say in reply. (It is *not* appropriate when counseling to tell someone what *you* think.)

When counseling, you may offer opinions and provide information, but withhold your advice and do not give orders. Instead, *ask questions*. Find out what is going on in the other person's head. The other person may come up with answers that hadn't occurred to him or her before. This makes the issue clearer for you and for the other person. An advantage of asking questions is that you do not have the responsibility of coming up with the "right" answer for someone else's major decisions.

Another advantage of active listening is that it can enable you to transform an emotional encounter into a cognitive task. Answering a question, especially those that involve facts such as "What was said?" and "What happened next?" diffuses the emotional intensity. Questions can change the focus from "How do you feel?" to "What did you do?"

Three levels of questions are essential for active listening. The levels vary in the amount of interpretation required.

Level One. Repeat what someone said, but use different words. Summarize or paraphrase what the other person said. For example, in response to a statement such as, "I can't accept the promotion. The move would be too difficult right now." You might say, "The timing is no good right now, is that it?" You have not introduced anything new to the discussion, but the nature of your response invites the other person to continue talking and thinking.

Level Two. Talk about what you think the other person implied by what was said. Such a response to the same statement would be, "Would your family be upset if you moved?" While the person hasn't said that his or her reluctance stems from family attitudes, it is such a common source of resistance to moving that it's a plausible inference. A Level Two question

indicates your involvement by the fact that you went further in your observations than the person explicitly stated, but your questioning observation is not a challenge. The use of a question indicates your tentativeness and willingness to listen.

Level Three. A Level Three question interprets a statement even further; you articulate feelings that may run deep and of which the person may not be aware. For instance, “Are you reluctant to move because you don’t want to put your wishes ahead of those of the family?” This can be the most useful response, because you are inviting the person to discuss the crucial issues. Level Three responses should be used only when you believe that the underlying issue must be addressed in order for the most important aspects to surface, and only if the result will be that no substantive progress will occur otherwise. Level Three responses should be used only if you are a skillful counselor and you have a trusting relationship with the person, because they are intrusive and can open issues that the person may not be aware of or want to disclose.

Level Three questions are often based on a feeling you have when the person speaks. It’s normal for emotions to rise. Asking a Level Three question says you trust your intuition and you’re willing to experience an emotional response. Although a Level Three response is the riskiest, it is also potentially the most productive.

Three: Hear with Your Eyes and Ears and Emotions

Be Aware of What Is There and What Is Missing. Most of us have had a lot of training in how to think, but we receive much less training in how to feel or be intuitive. Ours is a culture that prefers cognitive information to feeling data. But not paying attention to feelings means that you ignore and lose vital data about how someone else feels and why they make the choices they do.

Intuition—or how something makes you feel—is especially valuable in making you aware of what is being said without words. Your intuition is most receptive to the messages that are being sent by tone of voice, pattern of speech, intonations, facial expressions, and posture and body movement.

Intuition helps you hear what is not there—what is avoided, evaded, or missing—but which you sense ought to be present. Often, what is missing is at least as important as that which is present.

Beware though, as managers are not qualified psychologists or psychiatrists; therefore, they can question in order to gain clarity, but must not probe beyond what is comfortable and appropriate. You may only ask about an issue either to open it up or to help you decide whether you should suggest a professional counselor.

Read the Non-Verbal Clues. Although it has become fashionable to interpret facial expressions and body language in great detail, it is unnecessary and probably invalid to do so. It is sufficient to become sensitive to the general message that is being conveyed non-verbally. Check the following, for example:

- Is the body posture closed so that the spine is curved, the head lowered, the arms held close to the body? Does that convey timidity? Depression?
- Is the body slunk down, the voice a whisper, giving a sense of low energy? Does that imply depression? Powerlessness? Futility?
- Is the energy level high, the torso and head thrust forward, the eyes directed at you? Does this intensity convey a sense of importance? Anger?
- Are the eyes focused anywhere but on you? Is the person embarrassed? Fearful?
- Is speech interrupted by sounds such as, “aaah, errr, or mmmmm?” Is the person uncertain of what to say or uncomfortable saying it?
- Is the person’s voice uncharacteristically high? Does it sound tentative?
- Is it uncharacteristically low and deliberate?
- Is there an unusual level of formality? Is the person uncomfortable?
- Is there a sense of spontaneity and honesty—or of control and evasion?
- Did the person’s mood change suddenly? What were you talking about when the tone altered?
- Is there a basic incongruity between the words being said and the body’s message?

Being sensitive to messages that are sent without words is intuition. Pay attention to what is there and what is missing. Pay attention to how you feel and what it makes you think of. Because your goal is to learn about people, practice being aware of these cues. Respond to signs of tension by asking responsive questions, especially those at Level Two. Be aware that body language can be a sign that something of emotional importance is occurring. Ask about it, but don't over-interpret it, and don't take it literally.

Four: Stick to What Is Happening in the Situation

It is always tempting to dwell on the past. The past is interesting, and by understanding it we gain understanding of someone's present perceptions and choices. Often, the past feels psychologically safer to someone; after all, the past has already happened.

However, the past cannot be changed; therefore it should not be the focus of discussion. Moreover, in the past there were unsatisfactory behaviors that may cause you to judge and blame. So, although you may talk about the past, make it a minor theme. Focus on what the person is doing *now* and where he or she is going.

Generalities are often evasions of what is important; they lend themselves to emotional exaggeration. Try to keep the conversation specific and steer it to the present, especially to what is going on during your conversation, because that is what is most vividly real.

People usually talk about their *experiences*, their *behaviors*, and their *feelings*. Of the three, it is easiest to talk about an experience, because it is something that has already happened. Describing an experience means that we can be charming, funny, poignant, or dramatic without disclosing ourselves. But the point of counseling is tapping into the motivation behind our actions and to prepare for change; disclosures on the part of others should lead to self-awareness. Therefore, use the questioning techniques of Levels One and Two to help the person to describe exact behaviors and feelings in specific situations; help people to emphasize the near past in the current conversation.

You will know the person is comfortable talking with you when his or her non-verbal communications and your intuition agree. Only then are you in a position to ask: “What will you do now?”

Five: Don't Solve the Problem; Emphasize Choices

An objective of counseling is to empower the other person. The goal is for people to be active in their own lives. When you tell people what to do, you reduce their power; when you help people make their own choices, you give them power. Personal power allows people to initiate, evaluate, decide, and ultimately to create their own futures.

The most basic help you can give someone is to help the person make his or her own decisions. In short, try not to give advice, even if you are directly asked for it. Instead, present suggestions, options, and alternatives. People who are currently experiencing a problem are usually able to perceive only a narrow band of what is possible. They are simply too close to what is going on to gain a larger perspective. It is appropriate and constructive for you to point out alternatives and the feasibility and possible consequences of different decisions. You can offer opinions about different options, but that should be the limit of your input.

Six: Be Open to Emotions

Many people are uncomfortable with emotional responses from those with whom they interact at work. We may not want the burden of an intimate friendship because we do not want to be an emotional support for a co-worker or we may experience their emotion as a threat to us. Don't be afraid of other people confronting you and being angry. Emotions are a major key to their understanding and clarifying significant issues. An expressed emotion is vastly more constructive than the alternatives: passivity, silence, evasion, and denial.

The way to handle an emotional situation is to observe the emotions. Try to understand why they occur and what has provoked them, but do not

become emotionally involved yourself. It is easier not to become involved if you do two things: (1) think of emotions as data, and (2) remember that you, as a symbol of the organization or as someone with power over the other person, often become the target of the emotion. Simply ask the right questions and provoke awareness.

In counseling you want to become aware of others' responses. Equally important, but more difficult, you have to become sensitive to how you feel and the circumstances that give rise to your own emotions. This is the first step to controlling your responses so that you are free to concentrate on the other person.

Sensitivity to emotions means not only being aware when they are present and powerful; it also means being sensitive when emotions ought to be present and they are not. When there is too little emotion around the topics under consideration, that is usually a signal that something important is going on and more is involved than is obvious. You can probe this possibility using the questioning techniques of Levels One and Two, or you may disclose your own discomfort. Say something like, "I have a feeling that something is going on, but I don't know what it is."

If the emotional responses of the other person trigger significant emotion in you, and the intensity is so great that you are uncomfortable, you should stop the conversation and say, "I'm having difficulty handling this." A more effective use of a strong emotion is to transform it into a cognitive disclosure rather than an emotional one. You can do this by saying, "I can see that you feel very strongly about this. Can you tell me why?" This is a Level One question: it asks for information, but offers no interpretation.

You can ask, "How are you feeling right now?" This question really implies, "How do you feel about talking about serious matters with me? Do you feel okay with me?" While you may sense that the person is comfortable and trusts you, when you ask someone how he or she feels, you are empowering the person to choose to end the conversation.

Seven: Don't Judge the Other Person

Not judging and the skill that follows, “Be honest,” are the most difficult. Effective counseling requires us to be forthright in our opinions, but our opinions must not become judgments.

Of course we all have opinions. In fact, a major responsibility in our lives is to evaluate and decide whether a procedure or a behavior, an idea or an outcome is good or bad. An important part of a manager's role is to judge ideas and performance—to decide whether something is good or bad. The acuity of your judgment is an essential criterion in distinguishing whether you are merely an adequate or a truly outstanding manager. In coaching, which involves directing someone in daily work, it is appropriate to judge. In counseling, you must not judge.

Judging increases your power over the other person, and naturally it increases the person's feeling of powerlessness or dependence. Judging, in itself, increases the probability that the other person will ultimately resent you, be angered by what you say, and not hear you. In a subtle but pervasive way, the premise that you have the “right” to judge sets up an antagonistic exchange. Because you, as manager, are in a more powerful role, your subordinate may not display those feelings, but the feelings will be there—and they are counterproductive.

Your task as a counselor is to comprehend other people's perceptions, choices, expectations, and attitudes. What are their values? What do they think they need to do? When you understand, you can evaluate—but not in terms of good or bad. Rather, you may ask to what extent they believe their perceptions are accurate or inaccurate. In what ways are their behaviors effective or ineffective? Are their goals achievable or unachievable? Is the person's sense of self appropriate or inappropriate? Remember, the goal of counseling is to help another person see himself or herself more clearly and accurately and to help uncover the range of choices from which to make decisions and set goals. You want to increase the person's ability to take appropriate action and sense of empowerment.

Eight: Be Honest

The ultimate mark of respect for people is when you regard them as capable of managing their own lives. By being honest, you convey your belief in them. Actually, we are rarely dishonest. Instead, we are *not* honest. Usually, when we are not honest with people it is because we think they cannot handle the truth. Dishonesty, in this sense, is not the act of lying. Rather, it is evading, and evasion can be as potent as lying in bringing out feelings of mistrust.

Trust between people requires *communication*, but that does not necessarily mean *agreement*. You may agree or disagree, but if you can see the other person's point of view and state your own, you will build a relationship built on trust.

Honesty involves disclosure and feedback. You want to convey information, and you want the other person to know that he or she can do the same. Honesty is the essential firmament of trust—and it must be mutual. Honesty involves responses that are both supportive and challenging. Honesty requires that you give both positive and negative feedback. You must also be willing to hear about yourself.

When you disclose what you think and feel, and make it clear that you want the same kind of response in return, you create an atmosphere of honesty. It is one in which neither of you has to be defensive. This is because disagreeing becomes only a starting point from which you move on to create more and more agreement. Disagreeing, then, is not confrontation. It is merely the exchange of information. In order to gain helpful responses, you must treat others with respect. Thus, in a progressive climate, you both completely ignore any power difference between your roles at work.

Dishonesty is destructive because evasion allows individuals to remain in the purgatory between hope and tense despair. You do not do yourself a favor—and you do not do your employees a favor—when your lack of honesty keeps them in a state of uncertainty and anxiety. Honesty makes issues clear. It is only when issues are on the table, specific and definable, that they can be addressed and solved.

While counseling is never easy, you may come to find it is among the most significant and satisfying things you do as a manager.

About the Contributor

Judith M. Bardwick is founder and president of Bardwick and Associates, an influential management consulting firm. In addition to her many academic achievements, Judy has been an active business consultant for more than two decades. Since 1978, she has concentrated on issues relating to improving human and organizational effectiveness. She is a leading expert on these subjects and has combined respected cutting-edge research with its practical application throughout her career.

Well-known for her exciting and challenging speaking style, Judy has been a leader in the field of the psychology of women for thirty years. Her roster of clients includes dozens of Fortune 500 companies, such as AT&T, Hewlett-Packard, Nissan Motor Corporation, IBM, CONRAIL, 3M, Bell Atlantic, Lyondeti Petrochemical Company, Schering-Plough, NORWEST Bank, and the U. S. Treasury Institute. Bardwick and Associates has a high proportion of repeat engagements, reflecting the productive relationships formed between the firm and its clients.

Judy earned a B.S. degree from Purdue University and an M.S. from Cornell. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, and subsequently became a full professor and associate dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. She left the University of Michigan in 1982 and served as a visiting professor of management at the School of Business Administration at San Diego State University for a year. Since then, she has devoted herself to consulting and business-related research and writ-

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Judy's most recent book, *In Praise of Good Business*, was published in 1998. She is the author of four other books, *Danger in the Comfort Zone*, *The Plateauing Trap*, *In Transition*, and the *Psychology of Women*, and the editor of *Readings in the Psychology of Women* and co-author of *Feminine Personality and Conflict*. In addition, Judy has published more than one hundred articles and book chapters on a wide range of topics.

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