When Feedback is Self-Indulgent

Feedback was something that occurred when an electric guitar came too close to the power amplifier and emitted a screech. Is it any different in a business context, when you get feedback from someone in power, are you screaming inside?

If you are lucky then you have a manager who makes feedback seem a privilege from which you can learn and develop – perhaps you are one of those managers, so what makes feedback something that adds to our world rather than sucking out energy and enthusiasm? So what is going on, how should you expect feedback to be delivered and how might you judge your own ability at giving feedback?

Because feedback is aimed at a person or team, the focus becomes just that, and the situation is often greyed out – an acceptance that context exists but all tacitly agree 'we are not going to talk about it'….perhaps because we cannot do anything about the situation (or feel we can't).

So feedback is often posed as addressing a 'problem' and often put in terms of 'performance' which in turn relates to some job description or targets set the year before. This imbues the experience of feedback with a certain seriousness. Probably for another paper I have found in organizations the signs of the 'death of humor'. This is where people, so concerned with being on the right side of legislation, play it safe and do not use humor in case it be misunderstood as sarcasm or some form of bullying. Humor, or more accurately the confidence to use humor is usually an indication of a strong relationship where informal language and behaviors can be used but in a work situation this is often not the case.

The other aspect of defining the problem is that it relates to the person – it may become personal and therefore comes with all the emotional charge of an arguing couple.

So what are we trying to solve…or is it resolve – if the future appears stable (more of the same) we are closer to solving something but if it going to be an uncertain or changeable future then we may be closer to resolution: matching the person to the future challenges. Both may require training or mentoring or close support from the manager.

So why does feedback degenerate into criticism? Firstly it is easier to give criticism than to receive it - we think others should take our criticism because our *intention* should be apparent. Another reason is that critical thoughts are a rough and ready way – the quick way- to make a decision…but a decision which is designed to protect ourselves, so it is closely aligned to survival.

Whereas feedback, based on notions of development and growth is aligned to reproduction. One is about destroying the 'other' and one is about growth and creation.

In order to understand Feedback we may need to consider a different approach based not on criticism but critique. Critique is used extensively in the art world as a means of providing constructive comments in a way that motivates and inspires.

Table 1 sets out the differences of criticism and critique:

Table 1: A comparison of Criticism and Critique

Criticism	Critique
Criticism is all about putting oneself in a superior position, which is done by being: • negatively evaluative • accusatory • involves diagnosing Often this comes with attendant indulgences of labeling, lecturing, moralizing--and even ridiculing – it is judgmental	Critique is all about being objective and rational and starts by providing concrete information that could be helpful in motivating the other person to reconsider their behavior. Rather than being judgmental, it's *descriptive*. Being descriptive it allows the person receiving feedback to add to the description and be engaged in the feedback as a participant rather than being subject to feedback.
The critic holds negative assumptions about the person and feels they can 'mind read' the other person's motives Being Certain is usually Hubris which is effectively an inability to see what is in front…it is an excess of pride in one's own judgment.	One generally avoids speculating on the other person's intent, focusing instead on the actual *results* of their behavior. If the person giving feedback shares their *impression* about the other's motives, it's clearly stated as such.
Comments are typically general and diffuse, so that it cannot be defined clearly enough into a problem that can be resolved. Comments are made which attack the whole person rather than looking at behaviors – the former is difficult to change.	Discussion centers more on the *particular behaviors* and examples given which illustrate the behavior – this also allows both to imagine behaviors that remedy the problems. It is the behavior not the person – so look for simple and achievable changes
The delivery of the criticism may be experienced as demanding, intimidating, or threatening.	Critique, because it is about development, is delivered in a relaxed way which gives the person receiving feedback ample opportunity to agree or disagree as it is a joint process of

	resolution. Because delivery is designed to inform it is not seen as an attack.
Solutions come from the critic through giving edicts and commands. It is a one way process and leads to defensive behavior from the recipient. Any change will require monitoring which is time-consuming, and typically leads to a further cycle of criticism.	Resolution results from a discussion about the possible *benefits* of change. The idea is that it will enable reflection by both parties. This may lead to agreed change which is long lasting, and does not require policing.

If we agree that feedback is more closely related to critique then one can see what, as the manager, one is trying to do is:

o   create engagement as equals

o   see problem definition and resolution as a joint activity

o   see problems in terms of those things we can change

In the end the starting point is:

- respect the person being given feedback
- the person being given feedback to respect themself (without self-respect it is difficult to develop)

Feedback when skillfully delivered can lead to positive outcomes for both parties that strengthens relationships between individuals and within the team. And a positive outcome is that performance improvements arise proactively from the people in the job and makes the resolution of future problems easier.

A more nuanced benefit is that starting with the idea of respect builds the whole organization by instilling equality, acceptance of diverse views and where people feel they belong and so care for the organization and put effort into creating success.

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