Ten Common Mistakes in Giving Feedback

During many CCL programs, we ask managers and executives: "How many of you give good, consistent feedback to the people you work with?" Usually only one or two people raise their hands. Why so few? The reasons are varied: It's hard to do; I am afraid I will say something I will regret; people get emotional when they hear things they don't like; it might jeopardize my work relationships. All of these concerns are valid, but they all stem from common mistakes that people make when giving feedback:

1. *The feedback judges individuals, not actions.* Probably the number one mistake people make in giving feedback is putting it in judgmental terms. If you say to someone "You were too abrasive," or "You need to be a better team player," you send a strong message about what you think is "right" or "wrong" and that you've judged this person as falling short of expectations. Judgmental feedback puts people on the defensive. By the time the words are out of your mouth, your feedback recipient is already thinking "Who do you think you are calling me abrasive?" The energy spent defending themselves from your attack defeats any chance of a useful conversation.

2. *The feedback is too vague*. The second most common mistake made in giving feedback is the use of generalized, cliché catch phrases like "You are a good leader," "You did a great job on the presentation," or "You have a lot of common sense." The person hearing these words may be happy to get the compliment, but they won't have any idea of what exactly they did to

earn your praise. If you want to encourage someone to repeat productive behavior, you have to let them know what they did so they can keep doing it.

3. *The feedback speaks for others*. To say something like "Sheila said that you seem confused about your new assignment," or "People are telling me that they feel like you are micro-managing them," isn't effective feedback. At best the recipient will be perplexed by such statements and wonder where co-workers got such a notion or wonder just who is talking behind closed doors. At worst he or she may be embarrassed that such a comment came through you, a third party, and resent co-workers for making it in the first place. The person receiving the feedback is likely to become defensive and unable to hear your feedback.

4. *Negative feedback gets sandwiched between positive messages.* If you have to give negative feedback, it's tempting to first say something positive, then deliver a negative statement, then soothe the situation with another positive message (a good-bad-good sandwich). Your intentions may be good, but you're mistaken if you think people hearing this kind of feedback get the right message. Instead, the recipient will soon figure out what you're doing, filter out the two positive ends, and focus on the negative message in the middle.

5. *The feedback is exaggerated with generalities.* Another key mistake is using language like "always" or "never." Hearing these words, people naturally get defensive as they can remember plenty of times when they did not do what you claim they did.

6. *The feedback psychoanalyzes the motives behind behavior.* Telling someone that you know they are behaving a certain way be-

cause of an impending divorce, jealousy over a co-worker's advancement, or burnout is ineffective because what you think you know about someone's intents and motives is probably dead wrong. Feedback that goes to motive is likely to cause resentment on the part of the recipient.

7. *The feedback goes on too long.* Oftentimes when people give other people feedback, they don't know when to stop. They give advice, describe personal experiences, and try to solve the other person's problem. People receiving feedback need time to digest and assimilate the information they have just received.

8. *The feedback contains an implied threat.* Telling someone her job is in jeopardy ("Do you want to be successful in this organization?") doesn't reinforce good behavior or illustrate bad behavior. It only creates animosity.

9. *The feedback uses inappropriate humor.* If giving feedback is uncomfortable to you, or if you sometimes speak before thinking, you might use sarcasm as a substitute for feedback. But saying "good afternoon" to a colleague who is ten minutes late for a morning meeting doesn't tell that person how that behavior affected you or provide reasons to change that behavior.

10. *The feedback is a question, not a statement.* Phrasing feedback as a question ("Do you think you can pay closer attention during our next meeting?") is too indirect to be effective. It may also be interpreted as sarcastic, to which the recipient may respond defensively, or rhetorical, to which the recipient may respond with indifference.