How To Give CEO-Level Feedback
By Kent Porter

Feedback has a bad reputation in the business world. Few like to give it and fewer still enjoy receiving it.

Yet, when properly given, feedback builds trust, enhances relationships, changes behavior in a positive fashion, and opens the door to higher levels of performance. In fact, few skills have more of an impact on your effectiveness as a business leader than your ability to give (and receive) feedback in a timely and appropriate manner.

Traditional feedback rarely yields the desired results, primarily because the participants tend to side-step the real issues (or avoid them altogether) or the feedback gets delivered in a way that obstructs rather than supports behavior change. In contrast, "CEO-level" feedback puts the real issues square on the table and tells the truth in a way that it can be heard and accepted. It also strengthens the relationship and changes behavior in a positive manner.

To give CEO-level feedback:

1. **Focus on the relationship first, then the results.** When giving feedback, first strive to understand the other person's position. Focus on becoming other-centered rather self-centered. You don't have to agree or disagree with the other person, but you do have to understand their position. Otherwise you may damage the relationship and cause your feedback to fall on deaf ears. Remember that relationships lead to results, not the other way around.

2. **Demonstrate both truth and grace.** Truth presents the facts of the situation without embellishment, distortion or avoidance. Grace allows the other person to be who they are, without making them right or wrong. By itself, the truth often hurts. Grace alone is hollow. When mixed together, grace and truth open the heart and mind to hearing and receiving feedback.

3. **Go first and take the risk.** CEO-level feedback involves a high level of risk because it pushes both the giver and receiver out of their comfort zones and requires that each say what they mean. Going first and taking the risk models the behavior for the other person and begins to create a safe environment in which honest and open dialog can take place. When you (the boss) demonstrate an openness and willingness to receive feedback from others, it goes a long way toward building trust in the relationship.

The first time you give CEO-level feedback, the outcome may surprise you. Instead of storming out of your office in a huff, the other person may say, "Thanks, I needed to hear that." They may also make an immediate change in their behavior. On the other hand, some people may initially respond with

anger. But after a day or two to think things over, the anger usually turns into thanks, appreciation and improved performance. Some people will even admit to the difficulty in changing their behavior and will ask for your ongoing help.

Although it operates at a higher level, CEO-level feedback also incorporates the basics of traditional feedback techniques. When giving feedback:

- Be timely and specific, especially when describing behavior
- Describe the impact the actions had on you and others involved in the situation
- Explain (specifically) what the other person needs to do to improve
- Measure and record your feedback on a regular basis

Don't:

- Give feedback when you are angry or emotional; wait until you are calm.
- Be judgmental, cynical or uncaring
- Distort the truth to serve your own purpose
- Give critical feedback in public

Modeling the process and demonstrating your own vulnerability sets the stage for others when the boss asks for feedback and/or commits to development. And let's be practical, the boss is at least a part of any "problem" or breakdown in trust or communication. It is never a one-way street. When I hear a boss comment on a direct report's less than desirable performance, I always ask, "After doing a little honest introspection, which part of this problem do you think you should own?"

People appreciate feedback when it is done well because it enables them to grow. By practicing CEO-level feedback, you can earn the trust and respect of those who work for you, build stronger relationships within your organization and set yourself on a path to becoming a more effective leader.