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Reflections on Leadership

Management Tips for the Newsroom

Welcome to "Reflections on Leadership," a weekly essay on newsroom management produced by Newsroom Leadership Group partners Edward and Cynthia Miller.

Feedback is an Essential But Elusive Skill

By Edward Miller

The objective is to identify someone's learning needs

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Feedback. It's what every employee claims to want and every manager professes to do well. Neither claim is entirely true. All the management handbooks tell us that feedback is essential to learning, yet we find it so difficult to do well. Why?

First of all, when people ask for feedback, what they want mostly is praise. But when criticism replaces praise, the victim tends to shut down; people simply don't like to have their deficiencies scrutinized. Criticism seldom matches their self-perception, and if repeated often enough, will lower their self-esteem.

Managers are equally culpable. Too many of us view giving feedback as a divine right. We cloak our criticism in the mantle of learning: "*I was only trying to help him improve.*" What's worse, we often use feedback as payback for the pain inflicted by someone's mistakes and oversights. Either way, what we intend to be an analytical evaluation often becomes an emotional outburst and argument.

We all know how it can go wrong. What would make feedback go well? People will accept feedback on two conditions: they trust your intentions and they see a direct benefit to what you're offering. Sounds easy, but it's not. Here are some tips that will help:

- **Stop calling it "constructive criticism."** There is no such thing; all criticism is inherently negative. Here's the dictionary version of criticism: "*The expression of disapproval of someone based on perceived faults or mistakes.*" Nothing constructive about that whatever your intentions.

- **Understand why you give feedback in the first place.** The purpose is simple: *To identify the learning that someone needs in order to raise their level of performance.* As a leader your primary job is to teach, and the first practical step in teaching is to help someone identify what they need to learn.

- **Enroll the person in the process.** If someone equates feedback with floggings, he will resist the process and be blind to any learning possibilities. People must first buy into the idea that you want to help them, can help them and will do so without risk to their career or ego. So negotiate with people how they prefer to learn and follow their lead on how they want to be taught.

- **Ignore the sins of the past.** A newsroom is not a church; confession and forgiveness of sins should not be an issue. If someone has wimpy leads, don't bring in chapter and verse of all their shortcomings. Bring in examples of great leads and some techniques and tools for crafting them. Focus on what you want to go well in the future. Harping on what didn't work in the past will actually build resistance to change.

Effective feedback has four components: **information** about **progress** toward clear **goals** that are measured by mutually agreed-upon **standards**. If the information is simply your smart-ass opinion, or if there is no way to gauge progress toward specific goals with measurable standards, the feedback will be more carping than learning. Remember, your job as a leader is to teach, not to criticize simply because you can.