

## **Survival Of The Fittest: Feedback Is Not For Sissies**

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*“It is not the most intelligent of the species that survive the longest, it is the most adaptable.”*

Charles Darwin

In order to be persistently successful, people and organizations need to adapt continually to their environment. This requires information from the environment. The more active and open the feedback loops, the more effective the adaptation and change can be. Few leaders have truly open and honest feedback mechanisms within their organizations.

*“Emperor's” disease: not seeing the impact leaders’ behavior has on those around them and the results they are charged with achieving.*

The higher up in an organization a leader goes, the less accurate his/her self-assessment is likely to be. The problem is a lack of candid feedback.

As one executive expressed it, “I can’t put my finger on it, because no one is actually lying to me. But I can sense that people are hiding information, or camouflaging key facts, so I won’t notice...they aren’t telling me everything I need to know.”

Sometimes there is fear in sharing information due to a leader’s commanding or pacesetting style. People do not want to be shot as the messenger. Many subordinates and peers want to appear upbeat and optimistic and do not want to be the one to rock the boat by delivering negative or contradictory information. Whatever the motives, the result is a leader who has only partial information about what’s going on around him. There is a natural instinct to please the boss, resulting in a widespread tendency to give positive feedback whenever information flows upward.

### **Lack of reliable feedback at the top**

Many leaders believe they are attuned to their environment because they ask questions and solicit feedback. They believe they are getting the truth. But people have difficulty delivering the complete truth when the message is less than favorable. And the more personal the message, the less chance it has of getting delivered at all.

Top executives typically get the least reliable information about how they are doing. A meta-analysis of 177 separate studies that assessed 28,000 managers found that performance feedback becomes more inconsistent the higher the person’s position.

Another study of 400 executives shows that the most effective leaders actively seek negative feedback. They let it be known that they are open to receive critiques either of their ideas or their leadership. The least successful executives most often solicit confirming feedback.

### **Using 360-degree assessments**

The 360-degree assessment method offers a fuller picture for anyone wanting to improve his or her performance and contribution. Asking input of many people, subordinates, colleagues, superiors, peers and even family members can offer multiple perspectives. This multiple perspective is designed to give a fuller picture of the “real” person. How accurate this is depends on 1) whether the respondents interact regularly with the person and 2) whether the person reveals himself to others.

Since a leader can be different with each person, it is important that many respondents be involved. An overall consensus is then derived. Interestingly, one study shows that subordinates and peers are more predictive of a leader’s success than his or her boss. In this study of the effectiveness of leaders, how subordinates assessed the leader proved most predictive of the leader’s success and effectiveness both two and four years following the assessment. Even after seven years, the subordinates’ assessments were predicting the leader’s success with far more accuracy than those from the boss.

What inhibits growth and innovation, both personally and in organizations, is an attachment to one’s self and what has worked in the past. In order to survive in a rapidly changing environment, executives must continually update what is working. Without feedback and particularly without sending the message that one is receptive to feedback, there is no new information for making adjustments. There can be little adaptation and change.

The problem lies in resistance. Most people fear negative feedback and will not actively seek it out. They may feel that they can’t change anyway, that their ways are too ingrained. Research on learning supports the view that the emotional competencies required for successful leadership can be learned. It requires bravery to face the opinions of subordinates, but high achievers do not shrink from tasks simply because they are new or uncomfortable. Receiving feedback is definitely not for sissies.

Receptivity to feedback is clearly an important gateway to learning and practicing strategies for personal improvement. Staying out of defensive modes is essential to moving on and practicing new behaviors. These strategies are not easy and work best when guided by an experienced coach. Unless leaders get data about the quality and effectiveness of their interactions, they become prisoners of the status quo. 360° feedback is a major opportunity to access the data needed for increasingly higher levels of performance and sustainable success.