Project Manager Feedback

This cast describes how give feedback to a project team member if you are a project manager.

Despite Manager Tools stated disavowal of the matrix organizational structure, we've said before we know it exists, and many of us are in one. That means that there are project managers. We've said before that the Manager Tools Original Feedback model is for managers only. So what do project managers do?

We're going to address just one part of the PM's challenges here: how to give feedback to project members. And the short answer is: use the Manager Tools PEER Feedback Model. And since now we're applying it to both Peers AND Projects, we might periodically call it the PFM...even though we generally shy away from acronyms. This is just another addition to the family of both Feedback casts and Basics casts...because we know that high performance managers and leaders and executives provide candid and direct feedback to their directs.

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1. Project Manager Background.

Project managers fall into a nasty little category in our opinion. When we're assigned as a project manager, frankly whether we're in a matrix or not, the organization throws us to the wolves. Sure, sure, collaboration is key, and communication is our mantra, blah blah blah...every leader or HR person or corporate flyer says that's the way the company works.

But really, 95+% of companies DON'T work that way. Nobody teaches this stuff. As Mark likes to say - quoting his favorite leadership quote:

"If you take a flat map

And move wooden blocks upon it strategically,

The thing looks well, the blocks behave as they should.

The science of war is moving live men like blocks.

And getting the blocks into place at a fixed moment.

But it takes time to mold your men into blocks

And flat maps turn into country where, creeks and gullies

Hamper your wooden squares. They stick in the brush,

They are tired and rest, they straggle after ripe blackberries

And you cannot lift them up in your hand and move them....

It is all so clear in the maps, so clear in the mind,

But the orders are slow, the men in the blocks are slow

To move, when they start they take too long on the way

The General loses his stars and the block - men die

In unstrategic defiance of martial law

Because still used to just being men, not block parts."

In short, everybody SAYS you have authority as a project manager, everybody SAYS you're a manager, everybody acts as if the org structure supports a PM...but nobody gives a PM a break unless the PROJECT is important. Organizations don't tell us what we CAN do. They don't say officially what our authority is. They don't say we can fire someone. They don't say we can promote. In fact, it's Manager Tools' opinion that they don't say anything because there is NOTHING to say. *Project Managers have virtually NO official authority in virtually all organizations, despite their often **enormous** responsibilities.*

But as PMs we're responsible for performance, aren't we? Just like normal bosses, with the ability to hire and promote and increase pay, etc. And that means if we're going to be effective, we need a way to talk to everyone on the project team about their performance. But nobody tells us HOW. Except for Manager Tools.

2. The Project Manager Feedback Model - 2 Steps.

So, if we have to talk about performance, and we don't have any officially recognized power, we ought to use a model or template that addresses someone's performance without leaning on our role power. And that means the stripped down Manager Tools Peer/Project Manager Feedback Model. We strip out steps 1 and 4 - the ones built to address power in our original four step model.

So, for a project manager, the model has just two steps: *A, state the behavior, and B, describe the impact.* We're going to cheat a little bit here and call the first step, step TWO, because it IS step two in the core model. And we're going to call our second step in the Project Feedback Model Step 3, since it IS step 3 in our core model.

Here's the rationale, without revisiting in entirety the core FM. In step one, if we're the boss, we ask our direct if they're willing to hear some feedback (good or bad). It sounds like, "Can I give you some feedback?" Or, "Can I share something with you?". This is the most critical step when we're a boss - and therefore have control over our directs' addictions to food, clothing, and shelter. We have to ask, because if the direct isn't ready, they are unlikely to help us achieve what we're attempting.

Remember that the purpose of feedback is to encourage effective behavior. It's not to punish, or reward, or remind of a recent offense. It's not to shame, or inspire. The purpose of feedback is encourage effective behavior. Think about that word encourage for a second. Can we encourage the past? NO. The only thing encouragement is good for is the future. Even if we're encouraging someone to help them feel better about something in the past...it's still encouragement that they'll feel or do better *in the future.*

And what is the TOPIC of feedback, in the general model? Our direct's behavior. And the only person who controls our direct's behavior...is our direct. So if THEY are not ready to HEAR...regardless of how ready WE are to DELIVER...we're not going to encourage anything, right? Even if we talk, they won't be hearing us...and since we're talking about something only they control, we won't be encouraging anything.

Okay, so that's step one...we ASK. Because we have POWER, and they may not be ready to hear from someone in power about something we want to encourage - since that has risks, potentially - we ASK if they are ready.

In step TWO, we state the behavior in question. If they're late to a meeting, we say, "When you're late...". When they answer a question well in a briefing, we say, "When you give a short, correct answer like that..." When they are rude to a co-worker we say, "When you tell at Terry." We do this to focus the discussion on WHAT THEY DID. We don't say, "I feel that what you did wasn't valid." When we do that, we're making the feedback about our response. Step two creates the first half of an if-then, or the first half of a stimulus-response discussion. In other words, step two is the first half of the, *you-did-this-and-then-this-happened* pairing. It's action and reaction, stimulus and response. ***Because this has NOTHING to do with power but is simply a statement of the recipient's behavior, Step Two is the first part of the Project Feedback Model.***

Step three of the original model is describing the impact of the behavior. They did something, and because of that, something happened. You did X, and Y happened because of that. This is the response part of the stimulus response equation, the reaction part of action and reaction. "*When you're late,* ***it slows us down."*** *"When you miss a deadline,* ***I don't know how to brief the boss."*** *"When you stay polite when a customer yells at you,* ***it makes me proud to be your boss."*** While step 2 is confined to behaviors - which is a narrow construct - step three can be ANY impact at all. If it happened as a result of the behavior we observed, it's fair game for step 3. ***Because step 3 also has nothing to do with our role power, but is simply the impact of the step 2 behavior, it TOO is part of the Project Feedback Model.***

Step 4 of the original model is the place where we talk about the future. (Remember - feedback IS about the future.) If it's behavior that resulted in a positive impact (step 3 is a good thing), then we simply say thanks, and ask for more. "*Thanks." "I appreciate it." "Keep it up."* If step 3 demonstrated a negative impact, we'd ask for different behavior in the future. "*Can you do that differently next time?" "How could you do that differently next time?" "Would you consider doing it differently next time?"* **Because this step touches upon our role power - we can ask or even mandate that our directs do something differently next time - we leave this step out of the Project Feedback Model.**

Step 4 is an important distinction for us. Most PMs we know think it's probably fine to include step 4 for many of our project team members, if we "outrank" them in the normal organizational structure. Of course, we would argue that if you're going down the path of including step 4, why NOT include step ONE? Ahh, but nobody wants to do that. They want the power of step 4, without the responsibility of step one. We disagree. Leave them both out. And we'll talk about this later, but think about applying ONE MODEL to ALL PM feedback...and then think, would I ask my boss's peer, who is assigned to my project, despite his rank, what she would do differently? *We seriously doubt you would.*

So, how does it sound? Here's an important thought to have: ***we are sharing new information with our project team member. That's all. You did this thing here, and this other thing happened, thought you'd want to know.*** It's not really terribly positive or negative.

Yes, you heard that right: it's not terribly positive or negative. Because the decision about what's positive or negative ***so often rests with those in power, this model reduces the judgment of right and wrong or good and bad, and just says, I noticed this result from your action, and thought you would want to know.***

Mark even goes so far to tell managers we're briefing in client engagements, feel free to leave in the actual words, "just thought you'd want to know."

How does it sound?

When you brief the customer in advance, I appreciate the extra effort. Thought you'd want to know.

When you're repeatedly late, the client notices and mentions it. Just an FYI.

When you beat the quality standard, it's so much easier in test. Thanks.

When you don't respond in kind to Roger's rude attacks, I appreciate your forbearance.

When you re-look your budget so quickly, it sure makes our roll-up easier.

When you update the slides on short notice, it makes the briefing go well. Just an FYI.

An important point here about BEHAVIOR. Those of you who have been listening a long time know our distinct bias towards it. Focusing on anything other than behavior is going to be problematic. Those who focus on outcomes miss the fact that we don't control outcomes when we take action...we only control our behaviors. Nothing wrong with MEASURING outcomes...but giving feedback about them is mostly worthless. *Behavior drives all organizational results, is completely observable, and responds well to feedback.*

There are five types of behavior: *the words we say, how we say them, our facial expressions, our body language, and our work product.* Any of those is fair game for feedback.

On the other hand, ATTITUDE, STATE OF MIND, and INTENT are NOT effective targets of feedback. What does someone ALWAYS say when we tell them they have a bad attitude? *No I don't.* When we give feedback about attitude or state of mind, or intent, we start an argument, *because we're suggesting we KNOW what someone else is thinking and feeling,* ***and we never do.***

As an aside, it IS easy to ADDRESS attitude or state of mind or intent with this model...we just talk about it as a RESULT, an impact, not as a behavior. For instance, it's ineffective - and silly, and irritating, too - to give "feedback" along the lines of, *"when you're a jerk, the client tells me they don't like you in the meetings."* That's making attitude part of Step Two, which is about behavior. Compare THIS: *"When you roll your eyes, and call the clients stupid, they tell call you a jerk later in a meeting with me and ask me to have you not come to meetings."* Or, *"When you roll your eyes like that in a meeting, you look like a jerk."*

Or, compare, *"When you don't care about team meetings, everyone complains,"* with, *"When you miss meetings repeatedly, teammates complain to me, FYI."*

3. Works Regardless of Rank.

Part of the reason we slimmed down the project Feedback Model to two steps is that it COMPLETELY takes rank out of the equation. We mentioned earlier that a PM might have someone on our team that would be a peer of one of our directs. Ostensibly, we'd "outrank" them. And, this IS the case at least in a plurality of situations. But to build a model that addresses the plurality only makes sense if we want PM's to have to make a distinction between the various ranks of various team members in order to deliver feedback, and then to suggest a different model for those who are our "peers" or our "superiors", depending upon the organizational model.

But the facts are today that *organizations are becoming less and less clear about relative rank, and projects tend to include many different organizational representatives.* This makes it hard to DECIDE what model to use if we're unsure. And even if we ARE sure, having to pick and choose easily is STILL an extra step, and Manager Tools knows that extra steps reduce compliance among managers and PMs.

So, a PM CAN use this model to give (Two Step) PM feedback to someone who is assigned to our team even if they ostensibly outrank us. There are probably some situations where we wouldn't recommend it - it's our boss's boss, and we don't have a good relationship with him, and he's not known for being collegial are good signs. But the model works, and with good relationships and willingness, it's powerful as well.

4. Only With Project Work.

That said, there is a simple caveat that we've had to add in the past year. We had a PM tell us, *now that that guy has been on my team awhile back, he's fair game for PM feedback right? Even about something unrelated?*

No, no, hell NO. Project Manager Feedback is designed only, specifically exclusively and entirely for project related work, and only for those people on the project at that time. This is not Carte Blanche. It's PROJECT related. It works for the duration of the project, with those folks who "report" to us as their project manager. Only them, and only on stuff related to the project. We're not their boss, and we recommend never trying to be. Just be a good PM, and stick with two step feedback to them during the project.

Wrap Up

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