**Soft skills for an effective change leader; giving feedback**

Although it is often explored in articles about learning and teaching, few recent studies have investigated the influence that feedback has on change leaders and their teams. The model called ‘Giving Fish and Stretch’ is a classic coaching model of providing feedback that emphasises developing strengths into even greater strengths, and so is not mainly corrective, rather it aims to be a catalyst for growth by building on the existing talents and capabilities of the receiver.

The idea of giving fish was based upon the study into dolphin learning by the academic Gregory Bateson. It was developed as a coaching tool by behavioural change expert Robert Dilts. The idea is to acknowledge the positives in someone’s work. For example, if someone prepares a document or a presentation and shows it to a colleague and the colleague provides no feedback other than to point out spelling errors this is an example of someone imbedded in a critically judgemental model of the world. This does not encourage a relationship of psychological safety between the people involved and impairs rapport building. This is not to say that errors should be ignored, rather that if this is the only feedback offered it is unquestionably unbalanced towards corrective feedback.

**Giving Fish**

Giving fish is a metaphor for rewarding, recognising, and encouraging excellent behaviour, attitudes and performance. The principle behind this strategy in terms of engagement building is that human beings have a psychological need for recognition and positive feedback. In the absence of this the social glue that connects team leaders with their teams and vice versa is very weak. Giving fish is more than a functional task, it is a state of mind, an operating philosophy of leadership and human nature, and a key element of the psychological contract that cements open, trusting, and resourceful relationships. An extension to giving fish is giving stretch.

**Giving Stretch**

Giving stretch is a social strategy that is only possible if psychological safety is in place between team leaders and their team members mediated through rapport building processes. Giving stretch involves inviting another person to accept and consider one’s advice based upon observations concerning their performance of a capability with the aim of stretching their abilities. Everyone has their internal model of what good practice looks, feels, and sounds like. These internal models are deeply personal, and we guard them from criticism with emotional force. To give stretch competently the receiver needs to appreciate the skills and experiences the sender has which signifies credibility to offer fish and stretch.

An important aspect of giving fish and stretch is our choice of words, voice tone, body language, and emotional state. These resources need to be thoughtfully selected. As one can appreciate, we need to be skilled at matching to build the initial rapport required to open up the channels in others to be receptive to accepting your fish and stretch as authentic, sincere, and well intentioned. The approach that is aligned with the principles of giving fish would involve the careful framing of feedback statements which start with language patterns such as:

“What I observed in your performance was…”

“What I really liked about it was…”

“What you did that I really appreciated was…”

“The reason that I really appreciated it was because…”

“For me what was particularly impressive about your performance was…”

“The reason for this was…”

The above statements are examples of fish.

The above reinforces capabilities that are strengths. This is an essential aspect of coaching. However, we do also sometimes have to ‘stretch’ the capabilities of our team and we do so using the following language patterns:

“What I observed that could be further developed was…”

“The reason for this is…”

“I really liked when you… and if you were to… I think it could be even more effective.”

“The reason for this is…”

“When you… what I noticed was… and if you… I think you would…”

“The reason for this is…”

These language patterns should always be used in total sincerity and when done this way are powerful at building positive engagement and, thus, rapport with team members and encourage a state of learning by being open to the feedback.

**Key Lessons**

As change managers we must be skilled at giving feedback so that people are ‘ready’ to hear us and do not simply shut down, reject our feedback and even worse feel hurt, disappointed or even angry towards it and towards the manager. By focusing in on fish we build upon the capabilities of the other and enhance their confidence and create psychological safety between both the provider of the feedback and the receiver of the feedback. Once psychological safety is in place which means that both parties feel safe for interpersonal risk-taking we can blend fish with stretch. Rather than empathise corrective feedback we can frame the feedback by acknowledging positive elements then suggesting how the other person may build on these to turn them into greater strengths.

**Exercise**

Engage someone close to you in a conversation. Ask them to recall a time in their life when they were proud of an achievement. Encourage the storyteller by asking experiential questions. Try to elicit enthusiasm form the storyteller. When they are finished give them ‘fish’ using some of the language patterns below. Or alternatively you may observe a colleague delivering a task, and you can give them fish and if appropriate stretch. Write down what happened, how you felt, how the other person received their fish and stretch and then give yourself a fish and a stretch.

What I observed in your performance was…”

“What I really liked about it was…”

“What you did that I really appreciated was…”

“The reason that I really appreciated it was because…”

“For me what was particularly impressive about your performance was…”

“The reason for this was…”