



## ENCOURAGING THE HEART

Ground-breaking research by students at CMICS, the Completely Mythical Institute of Common Sense, has established that 98.7 per cent of workers at every level in all age groups in most occupations feel a whole lot better about their jobs when those they work with make sincere encouraging or appreciating noises. Commenting on the project, student supervisor Geer Rudjing-Lee said, *"Not a bad outcome, though it over-ran the budget and took longer than I had hoped."*

I report this total fabrication to make points about some of the differences between common sense and common practice. I tend to do a lot of that, because [EncourageMentors](#) exists to help you make commonsense common practice.

We know from personal experience that our capacity for Good Work is significantly enhanced when our efforts and we ourselves are appreciated. When we believe otherwise, we become easily stressed and soon give up or stop caring. We also understand that people who go out of their way to acknowledge our effort and output, even if only with simple words of sincere thanks, go far beyond the limits of performance appraisal systems or conventional customer-client relationships: they nourish a sense of self-worth, encourage further striving and build intrinsic rewards into the work itself.

Yet it is more common for organisational processes and individual behaviours to methodically search for people doing what is wrong, than for people doing things right.

### Conventional feedback - a sandwich or two short of a nourishing meal

The people who serviced my car wrote to thank me for choosing them and to say, (you know the sort of thing), *"If you are happy with our work, please tell others; if not, tell us."* So they're constantly soliciting only negative feedback, right? Is that what really motivates any of us?

OK, I get that they intend to limit the spread of negativity about the business, although, given what (real) research says about how many people are told about bad service, this is about as effective as trying to prevent the onset of winter. And I understand that they want information on which to base improvements: useful and necessary stuff to help us refine our ability to deliver what customers want and need.

But to reinforce the human tendency to point out only or mainly what is wrong, unleavened by comment on what is also right, is rather like teaching people to play piano with only the black notes: it is not nearly the full picture, not completely honest. Nor does a steady diet of complaints nourish the spirit or encourage the heart, particularly when reported as sweeping generalities, labels and judgements, as is commonly the case.

How negative? How common? Test this. Write a letter, report, career resume, job application, story or poem and ask 10 people to give you some feedback on it. (You will get very little if you do not ask, even if you put your writing in the public domain.) Four at most will provide you with any positive comment. Of the four who say, *"Good! Great!"* or *"I like it!"* two will follow with *"But . . ."*, and a list of specific things they do not like. Remind the silent six that you really do want feedback. Five at most will actually respond, pretty much as the previous two. Three or four will provide their negative comment in the form of judgements, non-specific generalisations and labels.

If you think I am inventing these figures, remember that roughly 68.32 per cent of statistics are made up on the spot. My points are these:

- Unprompted feedback that is useful, is relatively rare
- Spontaneous feedback is mostly negative.
- Where spontaneous feedback includes positive comments, it mostly reports them as unhelpful generalisations and judgements
- When asked to give feedback, most people interpret the request as an invitation to make only negative comments
- A good deal of so-called constructive criticism or feedback is unhelpful and even damaging

When I emailed my friend George recently to request feedback on the draft of something I was writing, he reported six very specific negative observations. No favourable comments, so I asked him to also comment on what he liked about it, if anything. He managed, "*The whole thing is good; I was just pointing out certain things it lacked.*"

I tried again, asking him to apply the same precision, specificity and descriptiveness to his positive, generalised judgment. I told him that labels or judgments such as "Good", do not help me understand what he liked or why. He replied, "*If one likes the sound of a motor, one is not likely to pull it apart! Only if one detects something not quite in tune . . .*". And he went on to report additional negative judgements: the writing was "*Sombre, negative and lacked humour.*"

### **Isn't it sufficient to know that we are ahead?**

The exchange with George demonstrated a common practice that flies in the face of commonsense. To be constructive at a practical and human level, feedback must do more than point out flaws: it must encourage the heart and reinforce what we do that is on target.

Author Amy Tan says, "*Everyone who writes must wonder at some stage how many readers pose that most fundamental of literary questions: Huh?*" As with writing, so in other work: until those for whom our efforts are created respond to them in a way that is rewarding and meaningful to us, some deep need is deeply unmet.

Very many of us work at jobs whose effectiveness and worth we gauge by such things as increased sales, repeat or further business, on being published, on continued employment, on changes to numbers. Of course we have our own opinion of how effective we are, how well we work to contribute to the bigger picture and of how much our efforts support others in theirs. Sometimes we get promoted. But is any of this or all of it, enough?

### **How much encouragement and appreciation is enough?**

For some people it **is** enough. But I have met only three of them.

Over 15 years I have routinely asked participants in my people-management training workshops from all levels of many different businesses to indicate if they get as much feedback about their work as they need. Somewhere between 12% and 18% say they do. The rest are clear that they do not and in all that time, only three people out of thousands have answered "Yes" to this question: "*Do you get as much encouraging, positive feedback about your work as you need?*"

This is hardly surprising. Surrounded by others' judgements as we grow up, complete our schooling and occupational preparation, we learn to look at ourselves and the world through eyes of judgement, seeking only or mainly what is imperfect, unpleasant, wrong or unsatisfactory. We thus see only a small fraction of whatever is before us.

I have no doubt this is why, during training workshops when faced with hearing from four or five people very specific and descriptive **positive** feedback about their behaviour during a skill rehearsal, participants become emotional and sometimes tearful; if they have been making notes about negative feedback, they put down their pens when the positive comments begin. We become confused by, suspicious and mistrustful of the motives or intelligence of those who offer us encouragement, kindness, tenderness, compassion, unconditional positive regard. These tendencies point to a deeply unmet need.

One of the most useful and often shocking discoveries made within training (and other) groups in which sufficient trust and safety has been established for complete honesty, is that almost all of us routinely conceal behind our business, professional, go-get-em, can-do façades, a seething mass of self-doubt and self-attacking judgements. The middle-aged suit is surprised to find this is so for the brash and strident junior marketing assistant. The intern is astonished to find this is true of the suave and elegant CEO she has been in awe of since joining the organisation.

### Creating a useful balance

It is wise and necessary to methodically gather feedback from customers including those within our organisations we exist to serve - our staff, our teams, colleagues and managers. Whatever we think of our leadership, management, other services or products, success depends on meeting the customers' needs. However, I strongly advocate shifting the balance of feedback away from the everyday preponderance of negative judgements, to comments that nourish and encourage the heart.

Attention to the organisational *primary task* (what an organisation must do in order to survive) must be balanced with increasing people's **capacity** for the *primary task* (what people need in order to grow and survive in their job-related roles). The conventional imbalance, in favour of the *primary task* alone (getting results), moves energy away from the source of those results. How we encourage the heart and nourish the spirit of our co-workers, leaders and managers, is a vital issue in every organisation - and every family.

What might our own pushing the envelope of encouragement do to our organisations (or families), to others and to ourselves?

### Try this: 13 ways to encourage the heart every day

- 1 Become someone who sets out to find people doing the right things right. Increasingly, you will get what you look for.
- 2 Frequently remind people of your confidence in their abilities and potential.
- 3 Work methodically on raising your own self-esteem: people who feel good about themselves find it easier to notice and feel good about others.
- 4 Say "Thank You!" Then say why you did.
- 5 When you ask for feedback, be very clear about what you need it to comment on and how and when you want it given.

- 6 When you are given unhelpfully general feedback, ask questions to clarify specifics and meanings before you respond to it.
- 7 When giving positive feedback avoid comment on absence of the negative ("*Not bad.*" "*Better than last time!*" "*Thanks for not screwing up.*" "*That's not stupid!*" "*I see your acne has cleared up.*") Comment on the presence of positives. ("*I admire . . . I enjoy . . . I like the way you did that, especially . . .*")
- 8 Give less negative feedback than praise.
- 9 When you have negative feedback to give, follow it with (a greater quantity of) positive feedback. Explain in advance that you intend to follow that order. They will be more inclined to listen.
- 10 Find creative and imaginative ways to recognise others' contributions to success.
- 11 Publicly acknowledge people who demonstrate commitment to shared ideals.
- 12 Collectively celebrate collective accomplishments.
- 13 Keep in mind that encouragement does not need to be given perfectly or elaborately, just sincerely.

*"Be kind; everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."* John Watson

*"When we are attuned to catch the sound of [only] a particular frequency, we miss the symphony of who we are and who we have become. The judging mind is not interested in exploring the whole truth, nor is it designed to measure the richness of all we have been given."* Wayne Muller.

*"Nobody ever got too much praise."* Phil Bressler.

*"It is the greatest of mistakes to do nothing because you can only do a little. Do what you can!"* Sidney Sheldon.

Tom Watkins

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