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Focus

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Few Leaders Excel at Giving Balanced Feedback

Recent surveys show that delivering feedback is “a discipline that many leaders at all levels seem to regard as discretionary.” (Julie Straw et al, *The Work of Leaders*, 2013) In fact, only 7% of leaders report they excel at both giving praise and addressing problems that need correction. (*Ibid.*) Providing both critical and positive feedback is an essential part of execution, but in my experience the importance of this continuous **feedback loop** is unappreciated by many leaders. I addressed giving praise last month, and now will offer tips on dealing with problems.

Leaders fail to deal with problems for many reasons, often because they want to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation. This is a misguided concern. People crave feedback, and so long as followers feel appreciated both as people and contributors they will accept constructive criticism. In this regard, follow a 3 to 1 rule, which has been empirically proven: Keep positive feedback at least 3 times more frequent than negative.

Specific tips for delivering performance criticism include the following.

- Deliver criticism in a straightforward manner, directly addressing behavior and outcomes.
- Focus on problems, not people.
- Make yourself vulnerable, and describe your failures from time to time.
- Keep everybody's eyes on the prize – the ultimate goal.
- Be willing to listen, and to frankly discuss the difference between unanticipated situations and preventable excuses.

Finally, if you by nature dread confrontation, remember that your best employees (silently) cheer when you step up and deal with unacceptable behavior. Sweeping problems under the rug is not a solution, and you owe your good employees a working environment free of festering problems.



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About the photo:
New grandson Hayden looks like an Ewok!

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