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Coach's Corner: Reach Out

Find the courage to give feedback and reap its powerful benefits

By Diane Costigan

I've recently been appointed to head up my firm's associates committee. The major issue right now seems to be the lack of feedback and less than meaningful reviews they receive.

I originally came from an investment bank where we were expected to give feedback – in fact, our compensation was impacted by it. Why is it such an issue for law firms and what can be done about it?

Feedback has been written about in this column already, and it will continue to be a focus until someone cracks the code in the legal industry and lawyers start making it standard operating procedure as other industries have.

And, this will need to happen sooner rather than later. All of the literature on the generation coming out of law school indicates that its members will demand constant feedback.

Since the market and labor forces are likely to be on their side for the foreseeable future, the legal profession is going to need to get up to speed on the practice of giving feedback stat.

Let's first look at why lawyers are not doing it, which will likely help with the mindset and behavioral changes that will need to take place.

You Already Have the Skills

When I would go on a rant about the importance of feedback at my former firm, most lawyers would give me the courtesy of listening but then smile and say that attorneys just don't have an appetite or time for "soft skills" or that "touchy-feely" stuff.

I would argue that giving feedback is a "hard skill" that, in fact, taps the very skills that lawyers call upon every day, including observation, analysis, research, critical thinking and effective verbal and oral communication.

From my own experience as a former law firm administrator (and I say this with great love and respect), there is almost no one better at telling you what's wrong with something than a lawyer, although granted, the topics were usually policies, procedures, memos, appetizers they didn't like at the firm event the evening before, etc.

Further, lawyers have to deliver difficult messages and give feedback to their clients all the time. So what's the difference?

With respect to clients, feedback and difficult messages are part of a lawyer's job. It's what they are paid to do and sometimes even receive praise and recognition for, even when the client doesn't exactly want to hear what's being said. In most cases, clients keep coming back for more. In truth, clients need the information and advice lawyers provide for the business livelihood.

The same holds true for feedback and advice being given internally. We all need feedback and advice on our performance for our own professional livelihood. Law firms that do not regularly provide feedback to their associates, both positive and negative, are really denying themselves a powerful tool they need for their business to thrive – information that can help refine the professional service they sell.

Commercial companies are often incessant in their pursuit to get feedback on their product, both externally and internally. They use that information to deliver a better product, which leads to increased sales or the ability to charge more for the product. In either case, that means more profits.

So Why Don't You Want to Do It?

So, we've established that feedback is a "hard skill" that lawyers absolutely can perform, and that can be a money-making endeavor.

The truth is, with the case of internal feedback, it comes down to "wanting" to do it. I would even suggest that in their crisp analytic minds, lawyers mentally note internal feedback for those they are working with almost unconsciously. The problem lies in the actual communication of the feedback, even when it's positive.

There are numerous factors that go into not wanting to do it. The pressure to bill that keeps increasing with every salary hike makes time a limited resource – the lack of which makes a worthy opponent of any sound argument of the value of delayed gratification. There is also a certain amount of fear that goes along with giving feedback, especially when it's negative; fear of the unknown; fear of a possible emotional eruption; fear of not being competent at it.

Also, the communication of feedback is a "relationship" activity that, in the absence of a paycheck and a job expectation or responsibility, is something most people would just rather not do. This is not just with co-workers but in our personal lives as well.

Most of us have a deep-rooted wish that those in our lives with whom we have relationships will just figure things out on their own so that we won't have to expend the energy ourselves. Let's be honest, how many people really step up to the plate to communicate with partners or spouses as relationship self-help books recommend?

Giving feedback can be daunting and it requires courage and energy. The good news is that after a few successful passes, it can become second nature to you. You just have to take those first few steps.

So, what to do? When faced with having to do something we know we should but really don't want to do, I recommend taking a few minutes to attach value to it.

Shift Your Mindset

Attaching value is one way to shift your mindset. Another is to think about the situation a little differently than before.

When I speak to associates, a universal piece of advice I give them is to treat senior associates and partners as clients. Turning this on its head, with respect to feedback, consider treating the attorneys who work for you as your internal clients.

In a sense, with the war for talent being as fierce as it is, you are competing with your colleagues to have the best associates working for you. Now, since you can very capably give feedback and difficult messages to your external clients because it is your job, you just need to think of your internal clients in the same way. And to the issue of “pay”, the form of payment you receive from your internal clients is that they continue to provide you with loyalty and stellar work product and customer service.

To address the “fear factor,” visualize the worst case scenario, which can be done in one of two ways.

You can imagine the worst case scenario with the specific individual (*i.e.*, tears, screaming, extreme defensiveness, physical violence, name calling, resignation, expletives, etc.) and then strategize how you would work through it. Alternatively, recall the most difficult conversation you’ve ever had and remember how you got through it – what worked and what didn’t.

In both cases, whether in your mind or your actual experience, you will be prepared for anything to happen and have a greater sense of confidence that you can navigate through it successfully.