

By Chris Thurber

“Chris, my supervisory staff members don’t always know the best way to provide feedback to their counselors. Most of the time, they see what needs improvement but don’t say anything except perhaps to me. Any tips on how to get them talking directly to their supervisees?”

—Susan Hooks, Director of Riverview Camp for Girls, Mentone, Ala.

Susan, the leadership team at Riverview is not alone. Many supervisors hesitate to offer staff feedback because they are worried about a supervisee’s reaction. They wonder: “Will this counselor get angry? Will he or she get defensive? Will he or she dismiss my criticism as harsh or unfair?” These concerns are normal. When a supervisor offers a supervisee feedback, the relationship may seem to be at stake, but it doesn’t have to be.

Skillfully executed feedback doesn’t put the supervisor-supervisee relationship on the chopping block. On the contrary, it actually strengthens that relationship because it promotes both parties’ professional development.

Start With The Truth

Let’s consider what would happen in an organization in which no one gave anyone else feedback—ever. You might think such an organization would simply stagnate. It might—at first. But after a

while, resentment, unhappiness and fear would become so toxic that the organization would not only fail to grow and improve, but eventually would regress and come unglued. Feedback is necessary for any group to survive, whether it’s a group of two people (i.e., a marriage) or a group of 100 people (i.e., a camp staff).

Proper preparation, thoughtful timing and sensitive delivery are essential feedback tools your staff needs. But first let’s debunk a few myths supervisors may harbor about feedback:

1. Feedback is all negative.

Although some supervisors embrace this myth, feedback includes both genuine praise and constructive criticism. Good supervisors work hard to provide more praise than criticism so the supervisees are generally happy to see them coming.

2. Feedback isn’t necessary, especially if people are doing well.

Part of being a successful supervisor is shaping your supervisees’ behavior. That requires praising them for all the specific things they are doing right, not just pointing out what

Feedback For Staff

Providing compliments and criticism effectively



needs improvement. Top performers need feedback, too.

3. Feedback should be offered in a praise-criticism-praise sandwich. That old formula is so predictable that it makes most staff cringe at the first expression of praise. When praise functions as a thinly veiled prelude to “the real reason I came to talk with you,” then any substance in the praise dissolves. Original supervisors offer praise by itself two-thirds of the time they speak with supervisees.

4. Feedback is unidirectional and top-down. Not even the most talented supervisors are perfect, which means they have something to learn, too. Skilled supervisors create a healthy culture by soliciting feedback from the supervisees. Asking “What could I do to improve?” is great leadership-by-example as well.

5. Feedback is all formal. Scheduled meetings and written evaluations are two essential—but rather formal—ways of providing feedback. Deft supervisors also use humor, short notes, spontaneous comments and non-verbal communication (i.e., a thumbs-up or a concerned look) to convey feedback.

Sharpen Your Skills

With the importance of candid, bidirectional feedback now in sharp focus, here are four key elements to providing effective feedback:

1. Preparation—Preparation starts before campers arrive. Conduct group and individual staff meetings to establish expectations for everyone’s performance and the expectation that feedback will be shared generously, in the spirit of professional growth and development. When supervisory staff prepare their supervisees, they should:

- Set regular meeting times
- Review a blank evaluation form
- Ask how staff would like to receive feedback.

When supervisors prepare their staff for regular feedback on well-defined benchmarks, it lays the groundwork for

open, clear communication about performance.

2. Timing—Timing of feedback should be both frequent and discreet, meaning at least daily (informally) and always out of the earshot of campers. Offer colleagues feedback soon enough for them to have a chance to improve, but not directly in front of children. Although some feedback cannot be offered immediately, most staff resent hearing “You could have done a better job” weeks after the performance in question. Time the praise close enough to a job well done so that it effectively reinforces the behavior.

3. Delivery—Delivery of feedback should be respectful, balanced, specific and solicitous. Use a kind tone, recognize colleagues’ strengths and weaknesses, cite specific examples and—to keep the feedback flowing in both directions—ask colleagues what they suggest you might do to improve. At the end of a formal feedback session, always ask, “Do you have any questions about what I’ve said?” and “Can I clarify anything for

you?” and “When can we follow up with each other to see how things are going?”

4. Follow-up—Following-up means checking back to see how a suggestion you’ve made has been implemented (“How is it going with the _____?”). Praise improvements and problem-solve together about changes that haven’t been made, but still need to be. Follow-up may also mean telling supervisees how you as the supervisor have implemented a suggestion that they made for you.

Beginning with a mutual commitment to professional development and ending with a follow-up session that indexes change, the aspects of effective feedback reviewed above are powerful components of organizational growth. Good feedback truly does feed. **CB**

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