Feedback is not an attack, it is a gift

We have all encountered situations where someone offers us feedback whether it is solicited or unsolicited and suddenly it appears like they are attacking us.

Ken Blanchard has correctly observed that feedback is the breakfast of champions" as a result, I am learning that since most things have two sides to them, I can immediately reverse my thoughts and welcome feedback as a gift that when effectively unwrapped can lead to my growth.

To reach our desired potential, we need to grow in self-awareness and feedback is one of the ingredients that when received and put to great use can result in a dish that contributes to our improvement.

To become a better leader, one must get into the habit of seeing feedback as a gift instead of an attack. This is because when those who develop the courage to share their feedback realise that we are not defensive each time it is offered, this builds trust and both the giver and receiver of the feedback are able to benefit from it. Stop for a minute and think back to a time when a significant piece of feedback was offered to you. I guarantee it must have been very uncomfortable for you but in hindsight you may have recognised the truth it carried and if you acted on it then the results must have yielded fruit for you.

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Every time we deflect honest feedback, we reinforce a version of us that is less than the potential we hold. I like what John Maxwell cautions us about learning from our mistakes. He says, "a man must be big enough to admit his mistakes, smart enough to profit from them and strong enough to correct them". However, before we can profit from our mistakes, someone must be courageous enough to point them out to us, and we must be humble enough to listen and learn.

Effective leaders get into the habit of actively seeking feedback as a tool to help them get better. They aim at asking deep questions like what is it like to be on the other side of my leadership and what can I do differently to yield better results? They know that feedback must flow both ways it must be given but it must also be received for growth to occur at all levels. Using feedback as a growth tool instead of a weapon creates a shift in the culture of any organisation.

Leaders therefore need to create environments that are safe for giving and receiving feedback. This can be through expressing gratitude for the feedback and resisting the urge to respond back immediately. One also needs to follow up on the feedback so that the person who took the risk can see that their efforts were appreciated.

Keep in mind that for feedback to be a gift, the way it is offered also matters. Feedback that is delivered poorly or with ill intentions can not only feel like an attack but should be avoided. The tone in which the feedback is given is key and so is the timing. As a rule, we need to praise in public and criticise in private. Empathy is also another key component of effectively delivering feedback.

To normalise giving and receiving feedback, we need to get into the habit of seeking it. Practice this by asking for it, let the person whose feedback you seek know what areas you are working on for your personal development and then ask what observations they have in that area that you may not be seeing yourself. As they respond, listen attentively without defending yourself and reflect on what has been shared.

Finally, remember that although there will be times when feedback may not come out as you desired, even the most clumsy or unwanted feedback carries with it a thread of truth and they key whether we learn from it is not about the quality of the feedback but in our ability to receive it. This is because feedback is not an attack on who we are but a gift that invites us to act on becoming better leaders.

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