

Out of the Blame-Game and Into Excellence Creating a Feedback-Friendly Organization

"I think that this issue of accountability and being open and receptive to feedback is probably the key in making changes in our business and taking it to the next level. We are either willing to do it or we are not."

Diana Zapata, Director of Group Fitness

Santa Barbara and Cathedral Oaks Athletic Clubs

Does this sound familiar?

Bill Davidson is a fitness trainer for ABC Athletic Club. During her workout, long-time member Jackie Hayes complains to him:

Jackie: "I saw Sally at the front desk arguing with a member over who was responsible for lost and found. The member looked very upset and eventually walked out, cursing and shaking his head."

Bill thinks to himself:

Arguing with a member!?, What was she thinking? I am tired of having to apologize to members for upsets I didn't personally cause. Last time I tried to give Sally feedback it didn't go very well. She got very defensive and accused me of criticizing her too harshly. In the end, it only made things worse. I won't make that mistake again.

As he walks to his car, he catches up with Tammy, one of the yoga teachers. Bill:

"You'll never believe what Sally did this time..."

Put yourself in Bill's shoes: What would you do? Would you give the feedback to Sally? To her manager? To the general manager? or do what Bill did - complain to yourself and others? If you did choose to give the feedback directly - how would you say it?

How you answer these questions depends on whether you have a "feedback friendly" club. A feedback friendly club is a club environment in which employees thrive on feedback - good and bad. An environment where managers model soliciting and responding to feedback because they know that feedback is a gift. It is the key that unlocks the door of learning - that allows us to grow personally - and allows us to improve our organizations.

Unfortunately, the story of Bill and Sally is not an uncommon one. In fact, it is probably one of hundreds of pieces of feedback that won't be given that month by dozens of different employees. When feedback isn't given, or is given and not received, it goes underground and fuels a cycle of gossip, blame and an employee defensiveness that undermines improvement. This self-reinforcing cycle is called the "blame-game."

The blame-game seems to be everywhere. Fitness blames maintenance, maintenance blames "too many projects/not enough help." Front desk blames "low pay and part-time staff" and everybody blames management. People are quick to assign fault to someone or something else. This attitude gains strength in numbers. It's easy to get someone to agree that it was "their fault."

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

The issue of feedback was not the first one to appear on Julie Main's desk. As the general manager of four athletic clubs - three in southern California and one in the Bay area - she found herself inundated trying to manage many of the day-to-day "breakdowns" that could of easily been handled at a lower level. Finally the insight came: The problem is not that mistakes happen - there will probably always be complaints about front desk service, club cleanliness, billing errors, equipment breakdowns and lack of staff attentiveness. The real issue is that these everyday problems were not getting resolved by the people who were creating them. Instead people passed the buck up to the the general manager's already overflowing desk.

Through various conversations with her managers and an anonymous employee survey - the themes of "feedback" and "personal accountability" began to emerge as the missing ingredients.

It has been three months since Julie and the department heads of The Santa Barbara Athletic Club, Cathedral Oaks Athletic Club, and the Ojai Valley Athletic Club - all in Southern California - decided to address the challenge head on. Their vision is to create a club environment where any staff member can give feedback to any other staff member with the confidence that it will be heard and responded to in a timely manner. This means that they are willing to examine how open they are to feedback. Is it easy for another employee or a member to give them feedback? Or do they get defensive? So far the journey into a more feedback-friendly culture has encountered these milestones:

Activate Accountability

The antidote to the blame-game is personal accountability. The first step to moving into a feedback friendly club is to redefine what it means to be personally accountable for feedback. For many people, even the words "personal accountability" can conjure up negative associations such as "It's my fault," "I am to blame" or "I am a bad person." As long as people are hearing these negative messages, feedback will seem like a personal affront and probably cause a defensive response.

By teaching people that accountability is an act of generosity and leadership, they will be more motivated to "own" their contribution to problems. Instead of people pointing fingers at each other - they can start to ask the accountable question: "What can I do to make this better?"

Teach the Techniques

The reason that most people don't risk giving honest feedback - is that they don't feel confident in their ability to bring it up in a way that doesn't offend. And once they do bring it up they question their ability to be able to handle the potential negative response. The last thing anyone wants is a conflict.

By learning how to say something - or even more importantly how *not* to say something - feedback can be given in a much more "listener-friendly" manner.

Catch Them Doing Something Right

If the only feedback people hear is negative, then someone is not doing their job. People will be much more able to hear constructive feedback when they know that they are appreciated for what they do well. Look for opportunities to acknowledge employees for what they are already doing right.

Practice in Public

Walk the talk. Managers must be willing to lead by example. They must be willing to model giving and receiving feedback - and do it publicly. This is not a secret initiative. Managers are responsible for making it safe for employees to give their honest feedback. Employees will feel safe when they experience their feedback is being valued, considered, and if appropriate, responded to.

Many clubs talk about the importance of great customer service. Many still have nifty mottoes and mission statements that promise "responsiveness with a smile." But few actually take the journey. The road toward a more feedback-friendly culture is not an easy one and is often paved with old beliefs, assumptions and habits. Julie Main, two general managers, and twenty six department heads at three clubs have chosen to take this journey.

Feedback is the bread and butter of improvement in the service industry. A staff that is responsive to each other's needs - will be responsive to member needs. When responsiveness goes up - so does the quality of customer service. Better service means happier members. Happier members means higher retention. Higher retention makes for a more profitable club and maybe more important than that - an environment charged with purpose and pride.

Imagine Bill Davidson going to Sally at the front desk and saying:

Bill "A member just gave me some feedback about an interaction you had with one of the members last week"

Sally: "uh uh..."

Bill: "She said that you argued with him and that the member ended up walking out shaking his head."

Sally: "Thanks for bringing this up Bill. I didn't feel good about how I handled that conversation...let me tell you what happened and then I would love to get your input on how I could have handled it differently."

For some this is just a fantasy. For others it is the future.

