

We're Too Nice To Give Negative Feedback

Don't "Polite" Yourself Out Of Superior Performance

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po·lite (adjective) |pə- 'līt|

: *having or showing good manners or respect for other people*

: *socially correct or proper*

He is so polite. She is a model of politeness. What a wonderful compliment to hear about yourself, your child, or even your spouse. In fact, it is hard to imagine a situation in which politeness isn't welcomed. But in the workplace, and specifically referring to accountability, the frequent default to politeness can undermine your leadership effectiveness and render your organizational culture unhealthy and unproductive. I'm sure you've heard the old adage; any strength exploited to an extreme becomes a weakness. The expressed consequences in the adage certainly apply to the challenges of an overreliance on politeness in performance management.

Leaders aren't oblivious to the presence and the resulting challenges associated with politeness. Earlier this week, during an executive coaching session, a V.P. of Human Resources remarked that her organizational culture was plagued by politeness. She lamented, "Everyone tends to be so polite that no one gives candid corrective feedback." Realizing the severity of the situation I informed her that steps needed to be taken immediately to address that problem or they were going to "nice" themselves into a noncompetitive position.

That organization is not unique in this regard. The issue of "niceness" has persisted for decades, perhaps even centuries. The phenomenon goes by many titles. You may be familiar with references such as Minnesota Nice, or Wisconsin Nice, or (insert your company name here) Nice. The actual title is inconsequential, but the behavior is anything but. Don't misunderstand me, civility is important, but that doesn't mean we must compromise on expected or acceptable performance.

In the heat of the moment, a leader can come up with a plethora of excuses as to why it might be easier to ignore or overlook a performance issue. Let's face it, in the short-term, it's just plain easier to let it slide this one time. But before you know it that one time has become the new team norm. As is consistent with many things regarding leadership, choosing to take shortcuts usually results in decreased effectiveness. The problem is that all of this ignoring, overlooking, and letting behaviors slide comes back to bite the leader and the organization in the hind parts.

The hidden problem with leaders hiding behind a shield of politeness is that it makes performance management a nightmare. If everyone is receiving average or above average ratings, the assessment of the talent pool is grossly skewed. Furthermore, if the need arose to terminate an employee due to poor performance, how can the organization defend its decision when the performance reviews show no record or evidence of a performance problem? It is inconceivable for practically every leader to know an employee is a poor performer but the employee continues to receive favorable, if not glowing, feedback both formally and informally.

No leader wants to find himself or herself attempting to explain the incongruence between the reality of a performance deficit and the fantasy of a laudatory performance review.

Here are three strategies to prevent politeness from high jacking your performance management system - and your organizational culture:

Set Explicit Expectation And Revisit Them Often – it is so much easier to hold people accountable when they know what it is they are being held accountable to. The first step in addressing the reticence associated with accountable is to gain agreement on what is expected and revisit those expectation regularly.

Don't Procrastinate In Address Performance Problems – no matter how uncomfortable this may be, it is very important to address the problem in a timely manner. Procrastination only serves to exaggerate the employee's astonishment and to dramatically lessen their respect for you as a leader.

Document, Document, Document – you have heard it before, I'm saying it again. Documentation is an important leadership responsibility as it helps all parties involved to identify what needs to be corrected. Become conscientious and meticulous in documenting both constructive and corrective behaviors. Ongoing documentation makes preparing annual reviews a snap. As a reminder, many legal cases are dismissed due to a lack of documentation in the employee file.

These simple (yet powerful) strategies are key to minimizing the negative impact of over politeness in the realm of accountability. There is certainly a place for politeness and civility in our workplaces, but that doesn't mean leaders should become ineffective by way of managing performance in the name of politeness. Contrary to misconceptions; high performance thrives when leaders aren't petrified by politeness.

Leadership Lesson: We're just too nice to give negative feedback. Really? Then you better get ready to have some even tougher conversations about downsizing and layoffs. Using politeness as a farce for avoiding constructive feedback is plain stupid – and costly. Addressing the performance problem is the key to maintaining world-class performance and world-class performers. Don't polite yourself out of superior performance.

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