



Spinach in Your Teeth? Tips for Creating a Culture of Honest Feedback and Self-Awareness

Description

When you love someone, you let them know when they have spinach in their teeth. This was a sentence in a marvelous talk by Beth Keane. I was fortunate to have worked with Beth until her passing. In my work, I often share the story of Beth and the key points of her talk. One of them is around helping people attain self-awareness.

At times, letting people know that something is amiss is not hard: “You have shaving cream behind your ear,” or, “Part of your outfit needs fixing.” In the workplace, it can be simple feedback like, “Please remember to close the loop on things,” or, “Next time use our template to introduce new hires.” At times, the messages will be tougher, from, “Your work is not up to expectations,” to, “If you cannot achieve your sales goals, we will need to replace you.”

While it can feel challenging to give critical feedback, it works much better when two things are present: a healthy sense of self-awareness in both leaders and employees and a culture in which honest feedback is regularly given and encouraged. When you are more self-aware, people are more willing to tell you things (especially things that are not necessarily easy to say), and you are more willing to listen. Also, having a culture of honest feedback in place helps you gauge whether or not everyone sees things the same way.

The desire of every leader is to not get to the point of letting someone go and of course to not be let go themselves. It seems each week I read about a study that says leaders need to be empathetic, set clear goals, develop those they supervise, reward and recognize good performance, remove operational barriers, show their own vulnerability, and be great communicators. All leaders want to do the above and feel they are taking those actions. Are they? Do those they lead see leaders as leaders see themselves? The higher up in an organization one is, the more filtered information one receives. People are less willing to tell you the truth.

In my book *The Busy Leader's Handbook*, chapter one is on self-awareness and coachability. To me, self-awareness is a key to performance in every role. If one cannot attain self-awareness, their ability to be successful at work and home is very limited.

We probably all know someone who, despite clear indications of issues, just does not get it. Think of

that person who says, “I did not see it coming.” Yet, chances are people close to them saw it coming. We’ve all heard that comment from coworkers after consequences occur: “It does not surprise me.”

Each person is an individual. Some are very astute in holding up the mirror to themselves, while others find this difficult. This tends to be particularly hard for the top executives in an organization. After all, they are in charge, so if the organization is not performing well, they need to own it. They also must be careful not to deplete the workforce. In sports they call this “losing the team.” When a team removes a coach, it’s often because the players have stopped listening to them.

Here are some tips that will help you (the leader) with self-awareness.

1. Create a peer group with whom you can share what is taking place, a group that will provide feedback. At the Studer Community Institute, roundtables made up of a diverse group of owners and leaders are held regularly. These groups share and learn together.
2. Push for feedback from the members of your team. Ask questions such as: *What am I missing? Am I going off the rails? What do you like about this action? What concerns you? If you were me, what would you do?*
3. Implement objective tools. Employee engagement surveys to take the pulse of the workforce and customer satisfaction surveys are foundational tools to have in place. So are exit interviews when an employee leaves or a customer does not renew.
4. Make sure every attendee at a meeting rates the meeting on a 1-10 scale. All too often, people complain about poor meetings, yet the quality of meetings is not being measured.

The key in all of this is to constantly work to create an environment where you compare your reality with the reality of others so you can see how aligned you are. If you consistently see that your assessment of the situation is really different from that of your team, you may have a self-awareness problem.

How can you put items in place to let those you lead become more self-aware?

1. Commit to clear measurement. How is the employee's success measured? Meet with your direct reports often to review the way their performance is measured. Recognize good outcomes as well as those not being achieved. When employees are clear on how they're being evaluated, they'll naturally be more aware of their performance.
2. Do not assume when the meeting is over that you and the person you have met with heard the same thing. To not create pressure on the person, let them know you are assessing your communication skills and ask them to send a summary of what they heard in the meeting as well as the next steps. I have seen a VP feel they were clear, while the leader they had the conversation with didn't comprehend it the same way.
3. If you feel that the self-awareness is not where it needs to be, let the person know that this is a "spinach in the teeth" conversation. This means you care about the person and would like them to be successful. Make sure the person knows what outcomes they need to achieve by a specific date in order to stay with the organization.
4. Provide opportunities for the person to see what *right* looks like. When a person moves into a leadership role, they are more isolated. They do not see other leaders in action. I can ask hundreds of managers, "When was the last time you visited another manager to see how they ran a meeting?" The answer is never. Yes, leaders are busy. But to be great organizations, leaders need to be able to observe what right looks like.

It is hard for most people to hold up the mirror. It is hard for me. So why do we do it? Because deep down inside each one of us, we want to achieve the outcomes we are being paid to achieve. Few things worth doing are easy. We need to be willing to stretch ourselves from time to time. We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It is the only way to grow...and the payoff for personal growth is always worth the effort.

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