

DOES YOUR FEEDBACK REQUIRE PAIN MEDS?

By Marilyn Thiet

As leaders one of the most critical things we should be doing for our teams is providing feedback. Receiving positive feedback has been linked to higher employee engagement, retention, and productivity. To add to the list of benefits is the fact that providing positive feedback is a relatively easy endeavor, one that usually leaves both parties with a good feeling.

Providing constructive feedback on the other hand is not quite as easy and as new research has shown us, can be quite counterproductive and painful if not done well. Naomi Eisenberger and researchers at UCLA have found that the brain reacts to emotional pain in a very similar way it reacts to physical pain. If negative feedback is delivered in a way that causes hurt feelings and emotional upset, it acts to demotivate the person. Another study from the University of Kentucky showed that emotional pain can even be lessened if traditional pain relievers such as acetaminophen is given prior to the infliction of emotional or social pain, further solidifying the concept that emotional pain is as harmful to one's well being as physical pain.

So, should leaders begin to dole out pain meds prior to giving someone critical feedback? While the pharma industry may want to jump on that bandwagon, I would opt for a different solution. At times the conversations in which we give feedback can be awkward and difficult, especially if we don't have a method or process in which to give feedback. Providing constructive feedback in a positive way that lessens the emotional hurt of the person receiving it is much more productive and more likely to result in the behavioral changes we want to see happen. While it may still be somewhat difficult to hear, I liken the pain of good constructive feedback to the feeling in our muscles when we change up our workout routine, that good ache that means we've stretched ourselves outside of our comfort zone. Some people tout providing positive feedback along with constructive criticism to lessen the pain. I believe if you are already providing positive feedback consistently to individuals you don't have to mix messages. The Oreo Cookie method of positive, constructive, positive feedback or the LCS method of Like, Concern, Suggestion can at times seem disingenuous and the messages can get blurred or lost.

One method of giving constructive feedback that many leaders have found to be effective is the DESC model:

- **Describe** - the situation or behavior you have observed
- **Express** - the impact of the situation or behavior, how it made you feel.
- **Specify** - a more positive behavioral approach, or better yet together in conversation come up with a better *solution*.

- **Consequence** - describe the positive consequence of change. Only go to a negative consequence if this is something you've provided feedback on before and are not seeing the needed change.

Like all feedback, encourage conversation and dialog. Understand what is behind the behavior. Understand the employee's point of view. Consider what changes may be necessary for you to make in order for the employee to respond appropriately.

As a leader work to develop the skill of providing feedback in a constructive and positive way that leads to behavioral change and good feelings for all parties, a much better approach than having to tell them to take two aspirin and call you in the morning.