

Feedback and Coaching in Asia:

How Is It Received? Does It Work?

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At the tables, the friendly banter and laughter has a nervous edge. You can see an element of bravado in the conversations that are taking place, a sort of mental and sometimes physical squaring of the shoulders preparing for what is to come. But as the papers are handed out, the noise dies down and an expectant hush comes over the room. You could hear a pin drop and some of those present gulp or take a deep breath before turning to the first page. I am reminded of final exams at University, the feeling that what you are about to read and how you react to it will have an impact on your life, but that it is too late to do anything about it now. However, these are not exam papers, nor are those opening the papers nervous students desperate to achieve a good result before embarking on their career. This is the scene that takes place at least once a week, somewhere in the world, at any one of the Center for Creative Leadership's leadership development programs as a group of experienced and successful business leaders, experts in their fields, receive 360 feedback reports. These reports detail their

work colleagues' (boss, superiors, peers and direct reports) evaluation of their performance as a leader.

And, according to veteran program facilitator Victoria Guthrie, it doesn't matter if the program is taking place in a room overlooking palm trees lining the sunrise coast of Thailand, or whether you've had to use a four wheel drive to get you through the snow to the training facility in North Carolina. That initial reaction is the same, she says, whether the program is populated by Indian media executives, North-American hospital administrators or assorted nationalities from a Southeast Asia based multinational.

Thereafter of course, reactions vary widely as the impact of the report is absorbed. Some seem relieved, even pleased, others don't like what they read. For those, Cresencio Torres, Enterprise Senior Associate, at the Center, describes the reaction to feedback, as rather like a compressed version of the grieving process. "It starts with denial, followed by anger, then a bargaining phase (categorized by the phrase - 'Yes-but...')then a kind of depression sets in and finally acceptance-all within a few hours." He warns participants, particularly in the 'anger' phase, that they should not make phone calls to those they suspect of giving them low ratings!

In fact, because the 360 feedback instrument is designed to be anonymous, and at least three raters from the peer and direct

report levels have to be included, you won't know for sure who thinks you are doing a great job and who doesn't. Aggregates, rather than individual ratings are given on a range of skills and perspectives deemed important for leadership. But if there is a large (more than 3 points) difference between the scores of raters from the same group on one competency, that will be asterisked, ie. if one direct report rates you a five and another two, you will know that there is some discrepancy on the perception at that level of that particular leadership skill. The report also breaks out the ratings of the different groups - charts show how you scored yourself, how your peers, your superiors and your boss rated you (he or she has nowhere to hide!) and how your direct reports rated you. The results can often be surprisingly different. It is not uncommon for someone to rate themselves say a 5 (highest score) on - for example 'decisiveness', and then to discover that their boss and superiors agree, that their peers give them a mid-range score of 3, but that their direct-reports rate them a low 1.

Sometimes it's the other way round too - with low self-scoring and everyone else thinking you're doing a great job. Participants are often surprised when they receive such assessments and question which is 'right'. Cresencio Torres reminds them, that 'Perception is the reality as far as those assessing are concerned. We judge ourselves by our intentions,

others judge us by our behaviors." Doug Riddle, Global Director, Coaching adds, "We don't often get this chance - to see ourselves as others see us." quoting the famous line from Scottish poet Robert Burns's 'To a Louse' (c.1785 on seeing one on a lady's bonnet at church). 'O wad some Power the giftie gie us, To see oursels as ithers see us!' Doug continues - "feedback is that 'gift' - that rare chance, which becomes ever more rare the higher you get in your organization to understand the impact your behavior has on others and to do something about it. It's a wonderful development opportunity."

So - after recovering from the shock or the relief of finding out what others think of them - how do they make sense of all the reports and assessments? Participants by this stage will have received, not only their 360 reports, but also will have taken part in a range of activities designed to show how, for example, they react to change, how they work with others, how they communicate and delegate, how they take charge and involve others in decision making and other valuable leadership skills and traits. Throughout the program they will have had a chance to watch themselves on video doing all these things and, with feedback from each other, to assess the impact their behavior has on others. For some participants, this is a revelation. "I couldn't believe it! There I was - interrupting everyone, not listening, speaking louder and louder! No wonder

my peers rated me as 'dictatorial in my approach'!" exclaimed one recent participant.

The next stage is to relate all this to the work environment. This is where feedback coaches come in. Each participant will have a session with an individual feedback coach, for whom the 360 feedback, along with the other assessments will form a key source of data to underpin a successful session. The feedback coach is the only person, apart from the participant, who will have access to the feedback data. Confidentiality and trust therefore are key. The purpose of the session is to help the participant achieve a sense of clarity regarding their own preferences, styles, strengths and weaknesses. According to Doug Riddle, " the skilled feedback coach allows participants to 'own' their own feelings, needs and goals, while emphasizing that the process is a collaborative conversation." Doug calls this the 'modified Socratic technique' and continues, " The essential nature of Socrates' art lay in the fact that he didn't appear to want to instruct people. On the contrary he gave the impression of one desiring to learn from those he spoke with. So, instead of lecturing, like a traditional schoolmaster, he *discussed*." Socrates himself, whose mother was a midwife, used to say that his art was like the art of a midwife. She does not herself give birth to the child, but she is there to help during its delivery.

Socrates saw his task as helping people 'give birth' to the correct insight. Since real understanding must come from within, it cannot be imparted by someone else. This resonates well with the belief systems of a number of Asian cultures, and can complement those of others. Thus a feedback coach can only really act as a guide to help the participant interpret the data as it relates to them, or as a 'midwife' helping them to 'deliver' understanding and insight. The coach can also work with them to help them identify goals, then craft these goals into workable, measurable action steps.

This 'modified Socratic technique' is a hallmark of CCL's leadership programs and the style is used by its feedback coaches around the world. CCL has a pool of adjunct staff members, who have been hand-picked for their expertise with the assessment tools, business understanding and people skills, then trained in the 'CCL/Socratic way'. The largest number of coaches are based around the United States, affiliated with the three US campuses in Greensboro, San Diego and Colorado Springs. In Europe, CCL's campus in Brussels has affiliated coaches, spread across the continent and offering skills in the major European languages. In Asia, where the concept of coaching is relatively new, the largest group of CCL coaches is based in Singapore, but there are also affiliates in Malaysia, Thailand and China and a new cohort of coaches has just been trained in India. As in

Europe, the cross-cultural experience of these coaches is very high, and many speak at least one Asian language, as well as English. Michael Jenkins, Managing Director, CCL Asia has a degree in Chinese and Japanese, and is a strong believer in the value of cross-cultural and intercultural understanding in a coaching setting. He says, "This part of the world is such a melting pot. Even among Singaporeans you get ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians, all with different languages, cultures, festivals and religions- and then there are countless nationalities represented among the multinational companies."

"We also do training programs in other countries in Asia, so it is very important that our coaches are aware of some of the cultural differences which might impact on a coaching relationship, and have the ability to relate well to people of any cultural background," says Jenkins. "In India alone, there are many cultures which have different customs, languages, and belief systems."

As to whether culture affects the way feedback is received, there are differing schools of thought on this. Victoria Guthrie argues that the feedback within the context of a leadership program is framed in such a way that participants truly do look on it as a 'gift' and receive it in that light regardless of cultural background.

Facilitator Dr. Luke Novelli comments that the way people react in particular to 'negative' feedback often has more to do with someone's personality type and other preferences. As part of the program, participants are given and compare, their Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) results. MBTI is a tool for understanding people by looking at eight personality preferences that everyone uses at different times. The eight preferences are organized into four opposite pairs - or dichotomies, describing four activities.

Based on their scores, everyone is allocated a four letter personality 'type' with different preferences and behaviours ascribed to the different types. Experts like Dr. Novelli can often take an educated guess at what someone's MBTI type is, based on their behavior in the program activities. He attests, "Someone who is an INTJ from Japan may react in a very similar way to an INTJ from the US."

Another coach from Singapore comments that gender also seems to have an influence on how feedback is received. "I find that women are more open to giving and receiving feedback in general, more willing to assess their leadership skills, their preferences and how they are perceived. I suppose, it's something we tend to do in other parts of our lives anyway - this just formalizes the process." The same coach also says; "It is important not to forget about positive feedback. The

people on these programs have been selected for development because they are successful and could be even more so. We have a tendency in Asian cultures not to praise people, thinking it will lead to complacency or big-headedness. Often the assumption is that, unless someone tells us we're doing something wrong, it must be OK. Therefore, the 360 feedback may be the first time that your boss has indicated you're doing well. Likewise we have a tendency to mark ourselves down - 'The nail that sticks out must be hammered down'. So, often we see much lower self rating scores than from other raters. Even in a generally positive report, we may focus on the one area that is slightly less positive than the others." Managing that is another important task of the coach.

Other experienced coaches caution that cultural values may also impact the participant's expectations of the coaching session. According to Adjunct Faculty member, Jacqueline Wong, "Asians, particularly those from countries with a Confucian heritage like Japan, greater China, Korea and even Singapore are taught to listen and show respect to our elders and superiors - particularly to teachers. Coaches therefore have to beware of being cast in the role of 'teacher'. This leads to the participant saying 'You're the expert, tell me what to do and I will do it.' In those countries, the feedback coach has to work hard at getting the participant to take ownership of and

responsibility for the learning." This is another take on the question posed to coaches around the world; "What should I do?" which requires a careful response tailored to the coachee's own situation and the cultural context.

There are also cases where a participant's cultural values may be different from those who are assessing him, which may prompt misunderstandings or misalignment.

One such case occurred with a participant from Thailand, who had a very low score from his American boss on 'confronting problem employees'. According to him, "I never confront problem employees - I never confront anyone. What's my boss complaining about?" In the Thai context, in a country which took the TV show, 'The Weakest Link' off the air because people found the humiliation suffered by those who were voted off the show upsetting, this manager felt that his 'non-confrontational' attitude was a value. It took a coach who was familiar with both points of view to help him see where the issue was.

Another coach who has extensive experience of coaching in Singapore and China as well as in India, commented, "In China, and in Singapore too, they tend to be very results focused, very pragmatic. They want to know - 'If I do this- how will it impact my job and therefore help me succeed at work'. In India, there seems to be more of a philosophical approach, an interest in discussion and debate about what lies behind the feedback and

what it might mean in a broader context. In a way they are more self-reflective and like to focus more on the big picture - the meaning of life and where they fit in."

According to Doug Riddle, "The outcome of the coaching should be the same regardless of culture: a better understanding of yourself, and how others perceive you to be. How you arrive at that understanding and how you apply it to your life may vary depending on a number of factors including culture. A good coach should be able to take all those factors into account and guide you toward that understanding."

At the closing ceremony to round off the week's training, the earlier anxieties and tensions have been replaced by a sense of optimism and purpose as participants collect their certificates of completion. Armed with a new-found self-awareness and goal sheets in hand, they bid emotional farewells to their 'partners in adversity' and head off to homes in countries as far-flung as Azerbaijan, the US, the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Kuwait, Korea, Indonesia, Australia and Singapore.