

TALENT

#5, The Feedback Issue

Quarterly

MAKING FEEDBACK
WORK IN AN



“EVERYONE GETS
A TROPHY” WORLD



Feedback Women Leaders Need — but Aren't Getting

In today's increasingly interconnected and collaborative world, managers must be able to balance give and take—combining their own good ideas and thought leadership with a listening ear. This kind of reciprocity, especially among peers, is vital to being both influential and also rewarding to work with. In our research with large samples of executives from around the world, peer ratings on this balance are one of the strongest predictors of how highly regarded a senior leader is by the rest of the organization.

We also find in our research that this is one of the few areas where women and men differ: Women executives are more often seen as outspoken and assertive in making their point but they also are more often seen as crossing the line and coming on too strong (see “Changing the Narrative on Why Women Aren't Reaching the

Top,” *Talent Quarterly*, volume 1, issue 3, 2014). Coworkers, especially male peers, report that women executives tend to be more defensive and harder to influence.

As executive coaches and talent-management advisors, we find that striking a balance between give and take is one of the most difficult things to help women develop. A major stumbling block is that they have a really hard time getting candid feedback on the issue.

Feedback Failure

Neither formal nor informal feedback mechanisms give women leaders a good understanding of their give and take. Most 360s simply don't provide direct, relevant feedback on this balance (for either women or men). And they certainly don't do a good job honing in on the issue in the tricky context of peer relationships.

We reviewed the item content in several commercial 360 instruments listed in the Center for Creative Leadership's reference book, *Feedback to Managers*. Figure 1 shows items that were the closest we could find, and they just don't get to the heart of matter. The items are either so generic as to lack specific guidance or they are

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so politically correct that they fail to convey when you have a tendency to steamroll others. Further, the items do not reference any particular role relationship, like peer relationships. If anything, the items seem geared more to your employees. These tools may indicate that you are influential but could be a better listener; however, they fail to convey the level of irritation among peers and the specific adjustments you could make to achieve the level of reciprocity expected.

Figure 1: How 360s Typically Address Give-and-Take Balance

Dimension	Item
Collaboration/Team Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a team environment where people feel valued and respected • Uses a team approach to solving problems • Encourages employees to work together
Persuasion/Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can influence others toward a plan of action • Promotes and sells ideas persuasively • Able to sway peoples' opinions
Listening/Open to Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willing to take time and listen to employees • Keeps an open mind when others disagree with him or her • Listens carefully to input

There are several reasons why it is hard for women to get informal feedback about how well they strike a balance between give and take. First, this conversation is easier to have with members of the same sex. Men seem to find it more comfortable and natural to tell each other when they are coming on too strong and to “back off.” They have a range of options, from

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light-hearted teasing to firmly standing their ground, that are familiar and understood “between guys.” Women may also find it easier to give feedback to other women, but as they get higher in the organization there just aren’t that many female colleagues to hear from.

The situation gets much more complicated when the exchange is between a man and a woman. Issues of gender-role expectations and power dynamics can make it awkward for a male executive to tell a female executive that he perceives her as dominant and overpowering. To top it off, we have been told by some male executives that they hesitate to give this sort of feedback to female colleagues out of fear of seeming biased.

Bias also makes it harder for women to hear and accept feedback that they can seem overbearing and defensive. It is too easy to dismiss the feedback as unconscious prejudice against women in leadership (and sometimes it may well be). In addition, women find themselves in a double-bind: Holding a strong opinion can seem unnaturally aggressive, but being too quick to accommodate others can seem less than leader-like. These forces were writ large in a recent situation where the first author was asked to coach “Anna.”

The Message Anna Wasn’t Hearing

Anna is bright, seen as top talent, and valued by her male manager for being direct and getting results. Her female colleagues respect her ability to stand her ground and hold her male colleagues to account. One female colleague described what she appreciated about Anna: “She is tough, she doesn’t let the guys push her around, she speaks her mind, and she delivers.”

However, the men around Anna see her directness quite differently. To them, Anna is difficult because, as one male peer put it, “She has to be right in every discussion. When she speaks up it is almost always negative—some issue that hasn’t been addressed, some problem that makes the plan unrealistic, or some unanticipated consequence.” Even if she is right about the challenges, the objections are seen as too negative; they see no support coming from her. To make it worse, it is very difficult to persuade her to reconsider a position once she has expressed her opinion. She seems to dig in and it feels as if it is either Anna’s way or no way. As another male peer said, “She is hard to be around. The style is just not helpful and certainly not any fun.”

Anna’s male peers have dropped hints in the same way they would with each other. These hints appear as ribbing. For example, one male peer has joked in meetings about Anna’s stubbornness. But she ignored the comment, as she does most of the running commentary from the men around her. It just didn’t make sense to her.

Anna doesn’t truly have any female peers. Of the two women she works with, neither is nearly as experienced or talented as Anna. They don’t see on a daily basis the problem her lack of give and take is creating. Overall, they admire her “spunk.” Although, in the rare instances where they have come up against her on an issue, Anna’s female peers saw her as using the same heavy-handed tactics. However, they confided that they have never given her critical feedback about it.

Anna’s company does an annual 360 in which direct reports and peers provide feedback. The review is taken very seriously by management. There are items about teamwork, client focus, and results. Anna’s feedback on these looks great. None of the survey items asks about give-and-take balance. And in the section for written comments, Anna’s peers hesitate to be too frank, not wanting to negatively impact her performance review for the year.

Anna’s manager sees the lack of give and take. He has even tried to raise the issue, but he wasn’t particularly successful. Specifically, he said, “You need to work more closely with the guys on the team.” Anna didn’t know what to make of the comment and ignored it, thinking he was trying to say that she should join in on the sporting commentary more often. That’s not her style or her interests. And to Anna it sounds as if it’s advice to be more like the guys—no thanks.

This pattern has continued for a couple of years and is reaching a cumulative effect. The frustration in working with Anna has led her peers to start working around her. The company is looking at Anna’s place in the talent pool, and the conclusion isn’t good. In spite of her immediate manager’s support, the managers above him have rated her below “key retain” status. The feedback they provided is that “she is too negative.” Anna is stunned, unprepared, and has no clue what any of it means. Worse, she doesn’t know what to do other than to leave the company.

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What Can Be Done

Anna's case may be hard to fix now, but there are several things that supervisors, the individual herself, and HR professionals can do to put a focus on striking a better give-and-take balance and help others avoid this predicament.

Supervisors

Note how well the people reporting to you are balancing give and take, and share your observations with them. Be more direct; subtle phrases won't be effective. Focus on behaviors and actions such as ones from the list below to avoid the distraction of unconscious bias:

- Expecting to have every decision go one's way
- Only raising concerns, not expressing likes and agreements
- Not accommodating peer requests frequently enough
- Not being easily influenced or persuaded by peers
- Unavailable to peers and therefore not hearing their perspective
- Inability to change one's mind
- Not letting some arguments go

Positive feedback will also encourage your team to continue to be effective; make sure that less-than-positive observations are offered in a constructive way. Finally, provide coaching on how to recognize give-and-take opportunities.

The Individual Herself

Women should be cautious about dismissing feedback, particularly feedback on aggressiveness, as necessarily reflecting bias. Here are a few things you can do to separate signal from noise in how you are perceived:

- Ask for specific examples of when you were seen as too negative, too aggressive OR too defensive.
- Think about how others react to your approach.
- Do you give as much to peers as you are asking from them?
- Do you treat your peers the way you would treat

a client?

- Sometimes on this balance issue it's better to know if even one person has an issue—you can then address it before the perception spreads.

HR Professionals

Monitor the internal assessments and talent discussions: Is give-and-take balance assessed and discussed? Are make-or-break behaviors (for instance, coming on too strong, being overbearingly aggressive, or appearing defensive) assessed, discussed, and fed back to individuals, especially your female talent?

Ensure give-and-take balance is covered in 360 assessments; most miss the mark. For example, items on teamwork are often targeted to managing a team, not working within a team of peers. Even items on collaboration often fail to address the issue of give-and-take balance. Sections on "give" (persuasion, personal influence) are usually separated from sections on "take" (listening, being open to influence). And, too often the notion of balance between these opposing but complementary behaviors is not conveyed. The more pointed the questions, the more effectively the feedback will pinpoint the specific actions that can make a difference.

Finally, help foster an open, constructive dialogue around the issues, providing guidance to help both sides cross the gender divide.

Working Together

Most organizations do little to promote honest conversations between women and their male peers. This must change if we are to reach our aspirations for the work environment. And when dealing with gender issues, which are complex and sometimes surprisingly subtle, everyone should strive to balance give and take. You may need to adjust your approach to, paradoxically, be both a bit more candid and frank as well as more open and receptive, to increase your chances of getting your message across. Above all, make sure you really know how your peers feel about their ongoing interactions with you. **TQ**

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