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You're Not Listening to Me!

Employee feedback is a state of mind, not an annual survey

Written by Jim Knutsen

Feedback is the fuel of high-performing organizations. Up, down, sideways – feedback is how we learn, course correct, fine-tune... *get better*. Without it, we assume what we're doing is working because no one's told us any different.

Feedback happens in cultures committed to listening. These are rare. In a recent study by the IABC, one third of companies surveyed said they rarely or *never* (!) engage in "listening activities" (employee surveys, town halls, internal social network, etc.) – and another third do it only once a year.

I'm trying to imagine asking my wife if she'd mind saving her feedback for the annual spouse's survey.

Think about it: When your spouse says, "You're not *listening* to me," what's the underlying emotion? *I don't feel important. What I have to say doesn't matter*. Imagine the cost of having your employees feel that way – not just to the bottom line, but to their well-being.

So, annual surveys are nice, and town halls take it a step further, but listening is more than a series of planned activities. It's a way of seeing your business. It's understanding the employee contract as something more like a relationship.

Not sold? Here are five good reasons to make listening part of your culture:

1. **They are you.** Every employee is someone's connection to your company. Maybe a lot of someones. We're not just talking about customer-facing positions with this one; all of your employees *know* people. Their social networks probably know how your employees feel about the organization – shouldn't you?
2. **You can be better.** A better leader. A better boss. Maybe even a better person. Opening yourself up to others' opinions and expertise expands your knowledge which, in turn, allows you to make even better decisions for your organization. This is true for every manager in your organization. Are you creating a culture where it's safe to give upward feedback?
3. **They know things you don't.** You know that job you hired your employees to do? There's a good chance they know something about it, and how the role could make a bigger impact. They know something about your customers, your culture, your systems and processes, your managers... maybe even about you. Why would you cut yourself off from that knowledge?

4. **If you're not listening, neither is anyone else.** You have powerful psychological influence over your employees. (Read this month's [featured research article](#) for more info.) If you demonstrate the importance of listening to and valuing others' insights, your employees will follow your lead. If your actions say that listening is not important, then it's not. Period.

Get Started

You need a listening strategy that's as thoughtful and comprehensive as your plans to communicate to employees. But there are things you can start doing today that will begin to shape a listening culture, and that just might lead to near-term business improvement. Listen, what do you have to lose?

Walk the Halls. Not every interaction with your team should be formal. Walk the halls, ask how their weekends were, strike up a conversation about something other than that looming deadline. Let your employees know that you're part of what goes on here.

Ask Questions. The easiest way to find out what someone is thinking is to ask. Whether you're having a one-on-one chat or delivering a formal business update, taking the time to find out what's going through the heads of your employees is important. Ask open-ended questions, such as "What opportunity do you see?" and "What's our next step here?"

Keep Quiet. When you ask for feedback, give the other person time and space to formulate a response. Resist the urge to fill the silence.

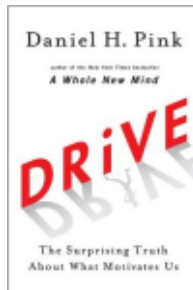
Hold Office Hours. Listening to your employees doesn't have to be a major event – it should be part of your everyday. The easiest way to enact an "open door policy" is to commit to actually having your door open for a certain time each day or week. Make it clear that this time can't be scheduled and that anyone should feel free to come ask questions, express concerns, or share ideas. Set the expectation for your management team to do the same.

Take Notes. This simple act announces to your employee that you care so much about what he or she thinks that you're going to write it down.

Show How Feedback Is Used. Employees will be more apt to give feedback if they know you're paying attention to it. Tell your team how their input has shaped a decision, contributed to an effort, made leadership think differently or validated something you already knew: *Based on what you told me last week, I've decided we need to change our approach to... Your observations really helped the leadership team understand...* Do this consistently and you'll see the feedback floodgates open.

Our Take On It: Commentary and opinion on the books that shape our thinking

THE BOOK *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*



Money, rewards and punishment are the old ways of motivating people. Today's marketplace requires us to tap into people's inner desire to succeed. That's the gist of *Drive*, in which author Daniel Pink analyzes decades of research to recommend what he calls an "upgrade" to our current business operating system.

Management has historically been built on the principles of carrots and sticks. *Do this, and you'll be rewarded. Don't do this, and you will be punished.* Pink argues that while that scenario works okay for straightforward, task-based positions, it's no longer relevant in the age of knowledge workers. In fact, research has shown that the reward/punishment dynamic actually creates the opposite effect, lowering productivity, creativity, and creating discontent. It makes work feel like *work*.

Pink defines behavior fueled primarily by these types of external factors as "Type X" (the X is for extrinsic), and argues that science supports an approach to motivation that plays to people's internal, or intrinsic, desires: "Type I" behaviors. He says that "Type I behavior leads to stronger performance, greater health, and higher overall well-being."

There are three key elements to Type I behavior: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. In essence, what truly motivates people is the freedom to direct their own lives, the desire to get better at something, and the feeling that they are part of something larger than themselves.

While the evidence Pink offers is compelling, what makes *Drive* particularly useful is the last third of the book, "The Type I Toolkit," which offers approachable steps to putting his theory into practice. Whether you're a leader trying to energize your team, or an employee trying to get your mojo back, several of Pink's tips are sure to resonate.

Recommended for:

- Leaders looking for ways to engage and motivate their workforce
- Individuals feeling "stuck" in their careers
- Educators seeking to foster creativity and self-direction