

The **Power** of **Peer Feedback:** **Servant Leadership** *in* **Action**

By Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D.

It's never fun to give someone corrective feedback. This act, done effectively, takes significant courage and emotional maturity to do well. And yet how do we grow if we don't get honest, caring feedback? I was inspired to witness a powerful example of peer coaching inside one of our Legacy Clients. Here is how the story unfolded.

Michele, a member of the Investment Operations Team of five *Partners at Bridgeway Capital Management, shared a story of how she was given some respectful feedback which jarred her self awareness. I was impressed with how she responded. Instead of getting defensive, to her credit she took ownership and used creative personal accountability to turn the problem into an opportunity.

“My teammate, Chuck came over to my desk and asked if I had a second to talk. He had a serious look on his face, so I nervously responded, ‘Yes.....What’s up?’ He noticed recently that I’d become very cold and short

towards our supervisor, Sharon. He said, ‘I’m not the most observant guy, but you’ve been really hostile towards Sharon lately. You might want to be careful and tone it down a little.’ My



heart stopped. I couldn't believe what he was telling me. Not because it wasn't true (because it was) or that I didn't appreciate him saying something (because I did), but I was stunned that my poor attitude was blatantly obvious to

someone who doesn't notice those sort of details. At the same time, as much as I didn't like hearing what he was saying, I was so appreciative that he had the courage and cared enough to express his concern. I knew I hadn't put my best foot forward, and I knew I could have been a little more welcoming to Sharon, our new supervisor who had recently joined our firm. But I was justifying my attitude by thinking about how I was stripped of a job that I loved doing - a job that I was passionate about and that I jumped out of bed for, to something that I could care less about. How could my Partners do that to me? Did anyone care how miserable I was or how degraded I felt?



To hear what I knew and was unable to admit was a real wake-up call. My heart sank and I was horrified that I'd treated someone with such disrespect; especially my supervisor. Sharon had gone out of her way to help me and was trying so hard to give me things she thought I'd enjoy doing, and I showed no appreciation, no thanks, and no gratitude in her effort to be so accommodating. All I was focusing on was how I hated what I was doing and how I thought it was so meaningless, so unrewarding, and full of petty busy work that anyone with a brain could do. And I took all that frustration out on her. Wow. I was in awe of what kind of heartless person I'd become. I was so ashamed and disappointed in myself. And I was saddened to

think that I was hurting someone who cared about me.

I thanked Chuck for confronting me and making me aware of my poor attitude. I knew the right thing to do was to apologize to Sharon, but I couldn't help entertaining my temptation to turn my attitude around and act as if nothing had happened. Deep down, I knew I needed to own my actions, and if anything, Sharon deserved an apology.

The next day I set up a meeting with Sharon to talk about some trivial issue so that it gave us a reason to meet. I didn't want to give myself the option to back out and say, 'Never mind, I didn't need to meet anymore'. I was so nervous. I was dreading confessing and admitting to how I'd been treating her so poorly. Before our meeting, I visualized how I wanted it to go, what I wanted to say, and how I wanted to be intentional with my body language so that she knew what I was saying was coming from my heart and that I really meant every word that came from my lips. The meeting went really well, and I was able to communicate without fumbling over words or rambling and fidgeting in my seat because I was nervous, uncomfortable, and ashamed. Sharon was very appreciative of my apology. She said that she didn't notice me being rude or cold towards her. On one hand I was relieved that she didn't notice, but on the other, it made me think about how long I'd been acting this way. She started working at Bridgeway in December, and I was unhappy long before she came. It saddened me to think that she's never seen who I could be, that I'd never given her my best self.

After my apology, I said I wanted to start on some of the projects she'd given me. I'd put them off for months because I had no interest in doing them, and I was waiting for her to tell me when to get started. In essence, I was making

her be my babysitter. I could sense a new energy forming in the room because she was so excited that I was taking initiative, and I was excited to make her happy and see her light up because I was finally being the person she expected me to be. We briefly brainstormed ideas and it was amazing to see how everything opened up and how we were able to collaborate in ways that we never had before.”

Michele described the transformation from a Victim Mentality - blaming others, waiting to be told and reminded what to do, harboring resentment and punishing those around you with passive aggressive behaviors - into healthy interdependent teaming. By having the courage to become self reflective and realize how she had turned her disappointment around a job reassignment into resentment toward a new supervisor, she freed herself to step back into the positive, collaborative, self-directed Partner she chose to be. As I listened to this story I thought about my own growth and realized that to make such a courageous growth improvement is very challenging. I wanted to learn more about how this came about so I went to Chuck, her Partner who provided the feedback. My question to him was, why did he choose to provide peer feedback? What motivated him to go to Michele and hold her accountable?

Chuck then shared this story. “I was blessed to have 2 great bosses early in my career, one at Ameritrade (Mr. S) and one at Direct Trading (Mr. B). I am not exactly sure why – but both gave me a lot of responsibility and little supervision, but they both made it very clear they were there to help, if needed. This allowed me a lot of autonomy, and my confidence grew with every “good decision” or positive outcome I did on my own but also made me realize that if something went wrong there was no one to blame but myself (i.e. I should have asked for

help “earlier” if I needed it). They were both great advocates for me as well. In both roles I had things go “wrong” and both went above and beyond to support me or go to bat for me. This gave me a great sense of appreciation and value. More than anything the effort they put into me – told me on a daily basis – They wanted me to succeed! And I could feel it!”

So based on that I asked Chuck why he chose to offer coaching to his team peer, Michele. It is always a risk to offer coaching when someone is falling below what you believe to be an acceptable standard and I was curious about why he took this risk. This was his reply.

“Well, first of all, I respect my Partner, Michele. I knew she wasn’t a petty person and I thought her behavior was out of character. I just wanted to give her the opportunity to know how she was being perceived and maybe this might help her choose to change, which she did, almost immediately.”



I asked Chuck to tell me more. He had clearly risked by holding his peer accountable. I wanted to learn more about what brought him to these beliefs and personal code of accountability. So he continued by telling me, “Why give coaching? I want to be part of a successful team. I was a great individual athlete as a kid,

but I never took the same pride in individual achievement as I did from team achievement. It was sweeter to share the success with a team that worked hard to succeed. The same goes for the professional world. You can accomplish bigger better things as part of a good team.

What skills do you need? Honesty and sincerity. People will see right through anything that is not genuine. Where do you find the ‘courage’ to do it? You have to assume good will. Most people want to be better people so if your feedback is genuine, people will accept it as such. You have to have a certain level of confidence, knowledge and success. Just like being genuine, folks can tell if you are self-serving, or blowing smoke (i.e. do not know your subject) – I have some level of confidence that I can provide value by providing respectful feedback.

To me the most important thing is to be willing to fail. Failing is not bad. The more you do it the less scary it becomes. Failing means you tried something over your head. You will probably overcome eventually. For example, riding a bike without training wheels? Did you fall the first time? Be willing to fail trying to help someone else, they will appreciate it. If it does not work, they will not remember the failure, they will remember that you were there to help them.”

As a Partner I Owe it to You to Tell You....

A second story comes from our Partners at TDIndustries. Ben Simmons, Executive Vice President, Multifamily, was serving as Senior Sponsor for a class on servant leadership and told this story. When JimBo Bunnell was reporting to Ben, he had a practice of coming to Ben from time to time offering constructive feedback. Ben said that JimBo would always

come to him privately away from others and say, “Ben, as your Partner I owe it to you to tell you XXXXX”. Ben said that using the phrase, “as your Partner I owe it to you to tell you....” gave Ben a way to prepare himself to hear constructive feedback. He said it wasn’t always easy to hear the coaching but he was always grateful for JimBo’s courage and loyalty to help him be aware of missed opportunities or areas where he could improve. Ben said he owed JimBo a lot because he had invested in making him a better, more effective supervisor and Partner.

This phrase has become a tool many others in TD now use because they feel safer offering honest feedback when it is thought of as a respectful obligation of Partners. I’ve also heard leaders say, “He offered me the gift of some constructive feedback.” When feedback is referred to as a gift it is more likely to be given more frequently in the spirit of “continuous aggressive improvement, which is part of TD’s mission statement.



Peer Coaching on the Job Site at TDIndustries

A third story comes from many years ago when I was doing site visits so I could learn more about the working conditions and current culture of TDIndustries. The year was 1976 and that far

back these two examples reflect the spirit of servant leadership, making them a great place to work and the contractor of choice for their *Clients.

It was a hot, windy day in July and I was taken to observe a six-story office building being built alongside Central Expressway. The six stories were only concrete slabs and I was in awe of their skills to stay safe and productive on a slab of concrete with no walls yet, six stories high with gusts of high winds. Getting to observe their safety and productivity practices was fascinating. And then something interesting happened.

An older worker, in his late forties, was getting out of his truck and returning to work after lunch. It was 1:20. A much younger TD Partner walked over to him and said something like this. “Sam, are you okay? Is everything okay for you?”

The older Partner responded grumpily, “Yeah, what’s it to you?”



“Well, I noticed that you have been late returning from lunch every day this week. (This was on a Thursday.) If your old lady ran off and left you or you are having problems making payments on your truck or anything else, let us

know and we’ll help you out. But if you just aren’t paying attention to the time and being careless about how long you are taking for lunch you have your hand in my pocket. We are *Employee-owned at TD and it’s up to all of us to be sure we are profitable. So let me know if you need help and if not, I’m counting on you to be fair with how much time you take for lunch.”

I was surprised by this conversation. I had been listening but with my back turned so as to not be noticed listening. I asked my guide for the day, Steve Saunders, if the younger man was the supervisor of the older worker. Steve said no that they weren’t even on the same crew. When I told Steve what had happened he said that holding each other accountable was part of their culture as was being quick to support each other in hard times. *Their culture was to start by assuming good will and offering help. But also to be very clear that taking advantage of other members of the team by not pulling your share of the load was not acceptable.* It became immediately clear why TD has such consistent successful performance and a great reputation in the work place.

Some time later Steve took me to visit another TD job in the Industrial District. This time it was late afternoon and workers were gathering up their tools and heading for home. Off to one side I noticed one young guy cursing below his breath and throwing his tools in anger. As I watched, again turning my back so I wouldn’t appear to be nosy but still very curious about the situation, another more experienced worker walked over to check in on the situation. He coached the younger man that his tools were the key to his success in construction and keeping up with them was both a challenge and a responsibility. He invited the younger worker over to his truck, opened the back doors and showed him his system of making sure he had

every tool before he left the job. He explained that it had taken him a good amount of time to set up this system of labeling every tool with his name and organizing a specific place for each tool with an outline so he quickly would know if something was missing. But he said it had repaid him many times because he had never lost a tool since.

The younger worker grumbled about not having time to do all this but his colleague respectfully asked whether he had the extra time and money it took to replace tools and be off work when he didn't have what was needed. Point well made! Then the older man offered to come early for as many mornings as it took to help his colleague label his tools and set up a system in his truck. What a generous offer!

Again, I asked Steve about this situation. Was this typical? He smiled as he explained that the younger man was not even a TD Partner. Instead he was a sub-contractor working for TD. "But we have learned that we are no better than the weakest link in the chain. So by taking the time to grow the maturity and work ethic of those around us, we make TD more successful."

That was 36 years ago. Now I can see the synergy and unlimited fruits of this culture as TD has earned a place in the Hall of Fame by Fortune Magazine because they have been on the list of 100 Best Places to Work in America since the beginning of this recognition. And they continue to be highly respected and seen as the contractor of choice by many of their Customers.

Peer feedback does require courage, confidence, practice and emotional maturity. And it pays off in so many ways. The more we all receive the gift of honest feedback, both for our positive performance as well as missed opportunities, the faster we can grow and improve.

"Awareness is not a giver of solace --- it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonable disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity."

—Robert K. Greenleaf

"Leadership by persuasion has the virtue of change by conviction rather than coercion. These advantages are obvious."

—Robert K. Greenleaf

*NOTE: We have adopted the practice of capitalizing the words Partner, Employee and Client as a way of showing respect. This is something Colleen Barrett, President Emeritus, brought to Southwest Airlines to reinforce their culture of leading with a servant's heart, warrior spirit and fun-loving attitude.

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com