"FOCUS FEEDBACK CAN BE A USEFUL TOOL. HOWEVER, LEARNING WHEN AND WHERE TO USE THIS TOOL IS THE MARK OF AN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL."

THE FOCUS FEEDBACK APPROACH

BY WILLIAM B. CASH

Often we are reminded by philosophers, semanticists, and communication experts that we can't go back into time, one minute is never like any other, and retrospect is only as good as our memory. Yet, we are told by the organization development experts to involve, improve and innovate by collecting data on our past performance.

Such questions as:

- How do our customers view us?
- What is the quality of our work from their point of view?
- How do other departments see us?
- What could we do to improve our working relationship with sales, purchasing, engineering, research, accounting?

What is preventing us from:

- Improving productivity?
- Responding more rapidly to customer requests?
- Reducing scrap rates?

The next time a department is concerned with their performance in relationship to other departments or outside organizations, try this approach.

The Focus Department

If the department is really willing to face the whole idea of hearing how they are perceived by others, this approach is very useful. This process should only be used if the department is willing to follow the entire process.

First, ask the departments either collectively or the top management to pick four to six individuals who represent departments that most frequently deal with the "Focus Department." These individuals should be selected because they represent departments with which the Focus Department has daily contact. Ask each of the selected representatives to collect data on:

1. How can the Focus Department improve their services (or performance) to us?
2. What don't they (the Focus Department) understand about our needs?
3. What could they do more of for us?
4. What could they do less of to us?
5. What could they *start* doing?
6. What could they *stop* doing?

These questions are only samples, but to effectively have time to process the data, use no more than eight. Once each department representative has been given these questions remind them that the Focus Department is interested primarily in how we can work better together. In order to accomplish this, the department representatives should either circulate these questions or discuss them with the entire department. Allow between two and four weeks for each representative to collect data.

Secondly, ask the representatives to sit down with the facilitator and videotape the data. Notice that the departments have not been referred to as the critics and the Focus Department the "critiquee." Be sure to avoid negative or defensive labels. Focus Department was selected after a number of labels failed. Representative or participating departments are the best label this author could devise for this activity. Hopefully, you can conduct the interview in such a way as to appear somewhat spontaneous and fresh. Begin by asking your representatives to describe briefly their careers in the company and then ask them to indicate the kinds of daily contacts they may have with the Focus Department. This should allow sufficient time for the representative to calm down and relax in front of the camera. Use some humorous devices such as background music like "Let It Snow" in July, Hawaiian music in the winter or funny visuals if you think it appropriate.

Putting the basic questions on a board, slides or superimposition may help the audience to see and understand the question. Once you have completed the warm-up, you may want to introduce this process by saying: "Today we are going to focus on the purchasing department and how they can improve their performance. We have asked Sam Zip to serve as the representative for engineering to focus feedback on our working relationship."

Begin with question one and proceed through all of the questions. Repeat this process with each representative.

Preparing the Focus Department

Now that data has been collected from all the representatives and recorded on videotape, the facilitator must prepare the Focus Department to receive the feedback. Depending on the size, location, and kind of work being done, the process can be limited to supervisors. Involving the entire department in hearing and processing the feedback is ideal but logistically may be impossible. Once the audience has been determined, hold a preliminary meeting with the Focus Department — this should be a very straightforward meeting. Explain that if they are genuinely interested in finding out how others see them, they must be willing to listen and process the feedback they receive. The representative departments were selected to provide honest, straightforward feedback on how to improve the work relationships. Although work will be the focus of the feedback sessions, there will undoubtedly be misinformation, personality comments, outdated knowledge, blame placing or other kinds of behavior and statements which cause some defensive reactions.

The Focus Department must be willing to process all the feedback. This does not imply agreement with all the feedback, but unless the Focus Department is willing to hear how others perceive them, then the process will not aid in improving the working relationships. Some of the most valuable data collected in this process is how others perceive our behavior, treatment or attitude toward them. The opportunity of identifying problems and perceived cause for interdepartmental difficulties is excellent, but sometimes a painful experience for the Focus Department.

Processing the Feedback

The Focus Department should be shown the videotapes and asked

Figure 1.
FOCUS FEEDBACK WORKSHEET

Feedback	Causes	Ranking 1, 2, or 3	Action To Be Taken	Person(s) Assigned	Start/Finish Dates

to simply record the data as they hear and perceive it. Instruct the group to record what they hear the speaker saying. In order to insure accuracy, divide the Focus Department into subgroups and ask each group to compare notes. Caution them against trying to read between the lines, interpret vocal tones or facial expressions, and make more out of the statements than is really in the statements. Unless they hear and accurately record the data, then no real progress can be made toward taking the needed action to remove these barriers to better working relationships. Once agreement has been reached by the subgroups, on the statements made, move on to the next speaker. Number each statement in consecutive order. Now the work begins.

Next, if possible, involve the entire group in categorizing each statement into appropriate work-related groupings. Once this has begun, ask the group to select one of these rankings:

1. Needs Immediate Action
2. Needs Clarification (or additional information)
3. No Action Needed

Now take all the "Needs Immediate Action" and proceed to establish causes for the problems and what action can be taken to remove the causes. Be sure to have a member of the group assigned or volunteered to follow through on the action needed to solve the problems. A focus feedback worksheet is a useful tool to facilitate this part of the process. A copy of the worksheet can be sent to the appropriate department(s) (Figure 1).

The second group of programs which require additional information or clarification may be the crucial area of this process. More real advancements can be made toward resolving genuine misunderstanding or misinformation. Clarifications or explanations should be completed at the highest levels and communication to the lowest levels. Policy questions, a lack of procedures, or perhaps the signing of a "Peace Treaty" (We won't complain about this if you won't continue to do that) may result for the items in this category. Be sure that items assigned to this category do not really belong in either one or three.

Items labelled with a three may engender one of two reactions by the Focus Department. The reactions are "We heard you but because of policy, law, ethics, we are going to keep it this way;" or "Sorry, that isn't accurate!" Some real caution must be used in employing category three because unless the facilitator is direct and honest, it will be tempting for the group to deny, reject or poke fun at the feedback they are being given.

Care must be taken to avoid the recriminations — "Wait until I get my turn" on the other end of the continuum, cooperate and survive is equally dangerous. The level of maturity, frequency of interaction, type of work being done, desire for improvement will be the key factors in determining the success or failure of such a technique. While guessing at motives is almost as much fun as picking winners at the race track, the organization development expert must know that the departments can benefit from such an approach. Some departments can take to this approach and will make it a part of their annual departmental performance review. Others may find it more destructive than constructive.

Some Cautions

For every technique used by an organization development expert, there are risks to be taken and benefits or failures as a result of the risks. To be better prepared to use this approach here are the general advantages and disadvantages.

ADVANTAGES

1. The Focus Department can be selective about its feedback focusing on work, policies, etc.

2. The visual and verbal impact plus coming from someone known by the Focus Department appears to have more credibility than surveys, interviews, or other impersonal feedback methods.

3. Tapes may be replayed to check them for accuracy.

4. One speaker can be compared to another in order to check the validity of these perceptions. If one speaker says it the impact may not be great, but if there is agreement, then credibility is enhanced.

5. Direct confrontations are avoided so the face-to-face kinds of arguments are not present.

6. Data analysis and listening isn't impaired by arguing.

7. Speakers can record when available and the Focus Department can view such tapes when they are available.

8. All levels of problems can be dealt with or put to rest.

DISADVANTAGES

1. The departments selected may be reluctant to be honest.

2. After collecting the data, they may wish to pick and choose what to put on tape.

3. Generalities may be substituted for specific problems.

4. Motives of the Focus Department may be suspect — "Why us, what do they want?"

5. Refusal on the part of the Focus Department to follow the process all the way through.

6. Used or processed by an insensitive organization development facilitator can do more harm than good to all parties involved in the process.

This technique is one source of data for the Focus Department. While it cannot and should not be the only source upon which to base a judgment about the performance of the Focus Department, it is certainly a dramatic way of getting the Focus Department's attention.

Once the problem identification portion has been completed and specific individuals have been identified to follow-up or take action, it is a good idea for the organization development consultant to check back several times with the Focus Department to insure that follow-up has taken place. A call to the participating departments to say thanks may be in order.

There are other obvious options to this approach. The focus may be on one facility, a set of policies, a line of products or create the focus as the need arises.

This technique can be used to resolve known conflicts, as an introspective device, or as an ongoing method of examining departmental performance. When departments ask "How do we know if we are doing a good job," "What do others think about our services," or "Why won't they cooperate?" the focus feedback approach can be a useful tool. However, learning to use a tool is important. Learning when and where to use this tool is the mark of a an organizational development professional.

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