How to Give Your Boss Feedback

By Amy Gallo | HBR blog network: Best practices | HBR.org

Working closely with anyone gives you useful insight into her performance. This is especially true of your boss, who you likely see in a variety of settings: client meetings, presentations, one-on-ones, negotiations, etc. But even if that insight could be helpful to your boss, is it your place to share it with her? Could you be putting your job or your relationship at risk by telling her what you see or by giving her frank feedback? Giving your boss feedback, commonly called upward feedback, can be a tricky process to master. However, if offered correctly and thoughtfully, your insight can not only help your boss, but also improve your working relationship.

What the Experts Say
John Baldoni, a leadership consultant, coach, and author of Lead Your Boss: The Subtle Art of Managing Up says that leadership is all about perception; if leaders do not know how they are perceived, their performance will suffer. However, the higher up in an organization a leader sits, the harder it is to get honest feedback. James Detert, Assistant Professor at the Cornell Johnson Graduate School of Management and author of the Harvard Business Review article "Why Employees Are Afraid to Speak" and "Speaking Up to Higher-Ups: How Supervisors and Skip-Level Leaders Influence Employee Voice" says, "Over reliance on the chain of command prevents leaders from hearing the unvarnished truth."
Your input can help your boss see herself as others see her and help her to make critical adjustments in her behavior and approach. However, giving this type of feedback requires careful thought; here are some principles to keep in mind.

The relationship comes first
The ability to give and receive upward feedback, like any form of feedback, is dependent on the relationship between you and your boss. Without trust, the feedback will be impossible to receive. Before giving feedback, you need to gauge whether your boss will be open to what you have to say. If you know that your boss is unreceptive to feedback, is likely to react negatively, or if you have a rocky relationship, it's better not to say anything. However, as Baldoni points out, "If your boss is open-minded and you have a good relationship, you owe him the straight talk." As with any feedback, your intentions must be good and your desire to help your boss should supersede any issues you may have between you.

Wait to be invited, or ask to be invited?
Even if you have a great relationship, launching into unsolicited feedback is ill-advised. As Detert says, "General advice on how to be a better boss is tough to give unless you're asked for it." Ideally, your boss has asked for your input and made clear what would be helpful to her in terms of feedback. Your boss may disclose her development areas and ask you to keep an eye out for certain behaviors that she is working on. Baldoni says, "In a perfect world, it is a manager's responsibility to make it safe to give feedback."
However, Baldoni acknowledges that in the real world this may not always happen. If your boss does not directly request feedback, you can ask if she would like feedback. This is often most easily done in the context of a new project or new client. You can say something like "Would it be helpful to you for me to give you feedback at certain points in this project?" or "I'm likely to have a unique perspective on what we're doing, would you like some feedback about how the project is going?" Again, these questions must be presented with the best of intentions. Since it is her job to give you feedback, avoid sounding like you want to give feedback in a vengeful way. Demonstrate your willingness to help her improve.

Focus on your perspective
It can be tempting when your boss is open to feedback, to imagine all the things you would do if you were in his position. However, your feedback should focus on what you are seeing or hearing, not what you would do as the boss. Baldoni recommends that you "frame feedback in form of your perceptions." He suggests saying things such as "I noticed at that meeting that you came across as bullying." By sharing your perspective you can help your boss to see how others are seeing him. This can be invaluable to a leader who may be disconnected from people in the lower ranks.

Focusing on your view also means realizing the limitations of your standpoint. You need to remember that you are seeing only a partial picture of your boss's performance and you may not appreciate or realize the demands on him. Detert says, "Subordinates by and large don't have a full appreciation of the reality of their bosses." Give feedback that is reflective of what you can see and avoid presuming what he is faced with. Remember that good feedback rules still apply. Your feedback should be honest and data-driven. Open with affirmative feedback and give constructive feedback with suggestions for improvement. Avoid accusations. "People react much, much better to specifics than to generalities," Detert says. So use details to back up your points.

When your boss bites back
No matter how carefully or thoughtfully you've prepared and delivered your feedback, your boss may get upset or be defensive about the feedback you've given. If you were asked for the feedback, Baldoni says you should hold your ground and explain that you were doing what was asked of you. Sometimes reframing the feedback can help. Detert urges that feedback is more easily received if you "frame it in terms of what your boss cares about." He says, "You can point out specific ways that specific behaviors are inhibiting the boss from achieving his goals."

Gauge her reaction to determine how she likes to receive feedback and what topics are out of bounds. Perhaps she doesn't want to hear feedback about her communication style or a certain high-pressure initiative. Rather than clamping up after a negative reaction, take the opportunity to check in with her about what would be useful going forward.

When in doubt, hold your tongue
If you're not sure if your boss wants to hear feedback or if the subject of the feedback is a sensitive one, it's almost always better to not speak up. There is no reason to risk your working relationship or your job, unless you feel your boss's behavior is putting the company or your unit in jeopardy. Instead, look for opportunities to give anonymous feedback, such as a 360 degree feedback process.
Principles to Remember

Do:

- Be certain your boss is open and receptive to feedback before speaking up
- Share with her what you are seeing and hearing in her organization or unit
- Focus on how you can help her improve, not on what you would do if you were boss

Don't:

- Assume your boss doesn’t want feedback if she doesn’t request it — ask if she would like to hear your insight
- Presume you know or appreciate your boss's full situation
- Give feedback as way to get back at your boss for giving you negative feedback

Case Study #1: Giving feedback by asking for it first

Wendy Wise worked for the Strategic Pricing Group, a small, growing consulting group. It was a fast-paced culture, in which people were often stretched and expectations were high. Because of the rapid growth, people were promoted quickly and expected to be able to do a job right away. Wendy was put on a team under Simon, a recently promoted manager. He was doing a great job but didn't have any formal managerial experience or training. Wendy knew that Simon would be thrust into situations in which he would have to adeptly manage clients and teams of consultants. Because of her tenure with the organization, she had more experience in these areas and she knew her job would be easier if Simon had the help he needed. Wendy said, "I asked myself ‘How can I find a way to help him without threatening him?’" She decided to start by sitting down with him, explaining to him the things she had been working on and asking if he would watch out for those things and give her feedback. Then she said, "Your boss doesn't see what you do every day, but I do. I know you’re doing a lot of presenting, for example, and I’d be happy to give you feedback if you’d find that useful." Simon was relieved that he didn't have to pretend that he was infallible and that he could rely on Wendy for frank feedback. As their working relationship developed, they each added things to the list that they wanted the other to look out for. Wendy said, "I think we helped each other be successful in the organization." Strategic Pricing Group has since been sold and both Wendy and Simon have moved on to other jobs, but they continue to reach out to each other for advice and mentoring.

Case Study #2: Being a voice for the organization

Shortly after Gerard van Grinsven became the CEO of Henry Ford Health Systems, a 300-bed hospital in Michigan with 1,300 employees, he hired a former colleague, Sven Gierlinger to be the Administrator of Hospitality Services. Sven and Gerard had worked together at Ritz Carlton and shared a passion for service. Because of their prior working relationship, Gerard often relied on Sven to share what he was hearing and seeing throughout the organization.

A few years back, Gerard restructured a department that needed better results. Because of the changes, there was some understandable grumbling in the department. Gerard is an effective communicator, especially in stressful times. He pulled the entire unit together and asked that the grumbling stop and the employees focus on making the new structure work and improving their results. However, the
employees left the meeting unhappy. Gerard turned to Sven and asked for his objective assessment: what would he have done in that situation? Sven could have easily appeased Gerard and said "you did the right thing" but he had heard from several of the meeting attendees that it had not gone well. He was honest with Gerard, shared what he heard, and explained what he would’ve done differently. Sven said, "I was able to give him that feedback because he trusted me. If the trust is not there, the feedback can be misconstrued." Gerard thanked him for his honesty and set about repairing the damage done in the meeting.

At leadership meeting shortly after, Gerard talked about the feedback he received and explained to his team how he changed his behavior based on the input. This reinforced Sven’s perception of Gerard as a leader who not only welcomes feedback, but makes use of it.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review. Follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.