

# CLEANING UP THE

# WORD IN COACHING

Based on an academic paper by Doyle, Walker, Nixon and Walsh

Coaching has become a central part of CPD and work based learning. Within the organisational framework, coaching is seen as a fundamental moderator between individual skill and performance outputs – the mechanism by which we can learn and upskill. Since we know that this kind of 1:1 attention, apprentice-style learning, is highly effective (Kolb, 1984) it all sounds spot on. So what's wrong with coaching? Well, it all depends on the quality of the feedback ....

Feedback can be a 'dirty' word in some organisations. Managers hate giving it – they skirt around negative issues, over generalise and fail to give sufficient details (Levy & Williams, 2004). London (2003) reports that receivers of feedback also delete and distort it so as to avoid personal responsibility for things they didn't like and take credit for those they did like (or vice versa, depending on personality)! Early research on feedback found these accuracy problems insurmountable whilst at the same time concluding that objective feedback was critical to the coaching process having any effect on performance (Kluger & DeNisi 1996). Molden (2007) explains the most useful feedback is free of judgement about its nature,



intention, emotion or any other type of external change. It should be seen as 'clean' – like a scientist in a laboratory test describing precisely what you see and hear. The notion of 'clean' (free from inference) has been developed by David Grove (1989).

Nancy Doyle and Caitlin Walker, of Training Attention Ltd, have spent the past 5 years developing a model of feedback which is based on the concept of 'Clean'. It can be hard to learn but once you have adopted Clean Feedback you need never be afraid of it again. Rather, it becomes a nurturing part of the learning process. We've been working with Sarah Nixon, Barbara Walsh and Beth Mitchell at Liverpool John Moores University to test the model with trainee teachers. We presented the research so far at the British Educational Research Association conference in September 2007. This is how it works...

A learner needs to know exactly how she did something wrong, so that she can avoid the behaviour in the future. Equally, how exactly did she do that right, so she can repeat it? Here are some examples of real feedback that was given to trainee trainers:

## FEEDBACK SET 1

1. You weren't aware of the groups needs

2. You were friendly and welcoming
3. Your style is like a school ma'am

This feedback is not 'clean' – it is full of interpretation and assumption. It does not tell me what those trainers did or said and I have no way of replicating or avoiding the behaviour. Compare it to the following:

## FEEDBACK SET 2

1. You talked with your back to the group while you wrote on the board which meant some people couldn't hear you. My interpretation of that was that you weren't aware of the group's difficulty in hearing you from the back.
2. You smiled and introduced yourself personally to each person as they came in the room. That felt warm and welcoming to me.
3. You spoke very quickly and loudly at first, whilst standing up, which caught their attention straight away, like a school ma'am".

## SO WHAT COULD I LEARN FROM THIS?

1. That talking with my back to the group is inconsiderate;
2. personal introductions and smiling is friendly and;
3. standing whilst talking loudly gets attention.

Can I repeat those behaviours when I want those results? Yes. Can I avoid them when I don't want attention or do want to be considerate? Yes.

We call the nature of the second feedback set 'sensory specific' i.e. it refers to what I have seen or heard through my senses, rather than

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what I have made up or interpreted from it. This is carefully separated from the feedback giver's interpretation. The first set of feedback is conceptual and symbolic.

Audia and Locke (2003) describe 'cognitive elaboration'; the process by which receivers of conceptual and symbolic feedback discern which of their actions caused it. If I receive feedback like the first set, I have to process it through all my own beliefs about myself, the feedback sender, his / her intentions, through my own capacity for self knowledge and change. These loops of thought require an investment of time and are subject to inaccuracies as described above. The second

feedback set works it out for me – the sender has to do the cognitive elaboration in clarifying which actions led to the evaluation. However, does that make the evaluation accurate and do I therefore have to accept it?

With Clean Feedback the answer is no. Talking with your back to the group doesn't matter to some, personal introductions are time wasting for another and standing talking loudly like a school ma'am can be overbearing and a turn off. However, we do have to accept that for the sender of the feedback, the evaluations were true and demonstrate their personal preference. Now I have a choice. I can accept the feedback and change my behaviour or not. This is the double edged sword of feedback in coaching. Personal preference is rife but is it irrelevant?

Again, the answer is no. Since all communication and social learning is littered with personal preference perhaps instead of avoiding it we should honour it. It's good to know the personal preferences of your boss and co-workers! The trick is to expand your coaching process to ensure that each individual is getting feedback from at least 3 different people. The sensory specific information will ensure that you are clear about your actions and from 3 people you can get a broader understanding of how different people interpret your behaviour. If everyone tells me that my back being turned is inconsiderate, I know this is something I have to work on. If only 1 person does then I can become aware of it, modify my behaviour in that persons' company and look out for others who might feel the same. The point, is that if anyone gives

you feedback, you have to assume there will be other people in the world who feel the same. The question is how many, and should it affect what you do?

We have observed that this kind of giving and receiving feedback fits best into a peer group coaching model, where everyone's opinion is valued equally. This fits with research that suggests that feedback from multiple sources is more effective (London, 2003). We've also found that in order to break down the barriers to giving and receiving negative (or 'developmental') feedback we have to set up a protocol which requires each sender to give 1 positive, 1 negative and 1 development piece in each interaction. By framing the negative as a required action decreed by the process people find it less personal (Wang, in press).

**Figure 1:  
THE CLEAN FEEDBACK MODEL**

**Something that you said or did that worked well for me was ...**

**I interpret this as meaning ...**

**Something that you said or did that didn't work so well for me was ...**

**I interpret this as meaning...**

**Something I prefer you to say or do is ...**

**I interpret this as meaning ...**

We've implemented this model with each other since 2002. We've built on the wisdom

of organisational trainers over the years who are clear that feedback needs to be observable and balanced (i.e. positive and negative). Our contribution to the received wisdom about giving and receiving feedback, we think, is the way we loop the interpretations back to learning about your colleagues. This makes the model useful as a systemic group learning tool – a dynamic process that builds teams.

We started training it to others when working in a failing school, as a remedy to the belief that coaching is a punitive measure and to help teachers become less isolated from each other. Since then we've used it in business coaching, teams where communication was fraught with conflict, with groups of long term unemployed people and we've taught it to pupils as young as 11. We use this feedback model as a mechanism to engender peer coaching and social learning ●

For more information on the research at LJMU, Clean Feedback for teachers and pupils or using Clean Feedback to create peer coaching networks please contact [nancy@trainingattention.co.uk](mailto:nancy@trainingattention.co.uk)

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