

## Can Your Organization Handle Feedback?

By Nicki Roth

*Research suggests that thriving organizations achieve their goals by engaging the staff in meaningful feedback to monitor performance, holding people accountable, growing talent, and creating an atmosphere of respect and continued development. But knowing this and doing this are two different things.*

For the first three months as the new executive director Martine did a lot of listening and observing. Among the many things she was assessing was the talent level of the staff. She was pleased to discover many strong contributors, but grew concerned about those who seemingly did not have the fundamental skills to do their jobs. As she reviewed their personnel files her concern turned into disbelief and frustration. Martine read only positive performance reviews and above average ratings. Was the problem with the staff? Was it the supervisors? Was it the leadership team? She was so panicked that she even wondered if she was the one with the problem.

I wish I could say that Martine is an isolated case. The truth is that this is an all too common story. Sadly, many nonprofits are lax when it comes to setting performance standards, providing honest feedback, supporting growth, and exiting those who don't measure up.

When searching for solutions, leaders first look at their systems and tools. Is there a good performance management system? Are goals and expectations clear? Do people use the tools as intended? Have managers been trained to give constructive feedback? In Martine's case all those boxes had been checked. There was a very good online performance management tool, managers and staff had been trained how to use it and supervisors sat through multiple training seminars on staff development. She continued her probe.

When Martine asked her leadership team, "How could these three people get such high ratings when it is clear that they can't do the job?" The team proceeded to explain "It's how we treat each other around here," which roughly translated to "We are kind and supportive and do the best we can with some folks." There were personal attributes about each person—the soul of the organization, the one who has been here from the start, the founder's nephew—that were offered as justifications for the treatment.

Fortunately, Martine is a very experienced and savvy leader, and she had seen this before. She knew that this was not a systems or tools problem. She knew it wasn't an issue of managers not knowing the mechanics of giving constructive feedback. Martine correctly understood that the unspoken organizational rule was: No Direct Constructive Feedback Allowed.

### **Boston**

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor  
Boston, MA 02116  
T. 617.572.2833  
F. 617.572.2834

### **New York**

112 West 34th St., Suite 1510  
New York, NY 10120  
T. 646.562.8900  
F. 646.562.8901

### **San Francisco**

465 California St., 11th Floor  
San Francisco, CA 94104  
T. 415.627.1100  
F. 415.627.4575

If this sounds like your organization, and you are looking for guidance on how to train your staff to give and receive useful feedback, I urge you to answer these questions first.

- What happens when you deliver corrective feedback to someone? Is it appreciated? Is it acted upon? Or is the response thoroughly defensive?
- When receiving a “meets expectations” rating do people contest this in writing? Or take it up the chain? Or proclaim that “in my entire career I have never received less than ‘an exceeds!’”
- Do people speak kindly to each other in meetings and around the lunch table but talk negatively behind closed doors? Is there a public veneer of pleasantness while privately the discussion is quite nasty?
- When someone challenges a leader’s point of view in a meeting is it deemed as inappropriate, disloyal, and/or rude?
- When feedback is delivered does it remain private or does it become hallway buzz?
- Are under performers rewarded the same as top performers? And are you losing some of your best talent?

If your answer to these questions paints the picture of a mistrustful culture where feedback is used in unproductive ways then no amount of tools or training on feedback will do the trick. The focus needs to be on creating an environment that is receptive to meaningful feedback and changes the informal habits of the staff.

Nonprofits may have some additional challenges when it comes to establishing the right tone. Often within nonprofits’ values or guiding principles statements some of these words appear: strength based, dignity, inclusive, greater good, all of humanity. In many organizations this has been interpreted as “only offer positive feedback.” This, of course, is skewed and misleading. What this creates is two conversation channels. One is a superficial demonstration of the espoused values of supportive collaboration and kindness. The other is an underground dialogue of whispered critical feedback. The problem is not that poor performance is noticed but rather that the concerns are not allowed to surface in productive ways. In the worst scenarios the hallway negativity can become excessive and damaging.

Even if your organization has some of the issues mentioned here, the solutions are not as out of reach as you think. In fact, Martine methodically led the organization to develop an atmosphere that values open and honest feedback.

- **Gather the best leaders.** Martine knew this was not a one-person job; she needed her entire leadership team to step up. When she assessed the competence of each member she decided she needed to make some critical moves. She removed her deputy and replaced him with someone she could trust to move her agenda forward. She also swapped out two of the four managers. Her new team was capable of having honest, supportive, and challenging discussions with staff. *Bonus points:* By setting high standards on her own team and taking the necessary steps to make bold changes, she sent the strongest possible message to the staff.
- **Say and do what you expect from others.** Staff meetings and one-on-ones took on a distinctly different tone. Martine asked great questions that led to more robust conversations. These questions exposed the weaknesses and gaps in a respectful manner. She also publicly acknowledged her own areas for growth in the context of

these discussions. *Bonus points:* Her behavior telegraphed that we are all on a learning curve and that is fine.

- **Address subpar behavior consistently.** Even though there were no critical notes in anyone's files, Martine and her team began to document religiously. They wrote up each discussion and sent a copy to the employee. These notes included what commitments the employee made to improve the situation. Everything was transparent. *Bonus points:* With these honest, constructive, documented private discussions taking place regularly, the underground buzz diminished significantly. Since the employee knew where they stood there were no more secrets—except the ones the employee wanted to keep from his/her peers!
- **Exit people when necessary.** Martine ran things by the book. Provide good supervision to staff, help them grow and change bad habits, give them every chance to succeed, maintain an ongoing feedback dialogue about achievements and challenges, and document everything. If, after all that effort, the person still cannot perform then help them leave the organization with dignity still intact. *Bonus points:* Those that remain **know** they are doing a good job because the landscape has been cleared. This creates a wildly devoted and hard-working staff.

This transition took nearly two years to execute. That's fairly typical of this kind of culture change. Martine wishes it could have gone faster and she still wants to make improvements. But she can't argue with the positive impact. The ongoing dialogues are open, honest, productive, and valuable. People overtly and covertly feel respected—and challenged. Leaders and staff have grown professionally and feel supported to continue to do so. And then there are their results. They went from being one of the worst satellite offices to being one of the top three. In fact their dramatic improvement prompted other offices to engage in a similar set of activities. Martine's success raised the bar for everyone.

Creating an environment that is receptive to ongoing feedback is the purview of the leader and the leadership team. It is not a training course. It takes backbone, patience, and persistence. The unique challenge for nonprofits is to make those stated values come alive differently. Treating all people with dignity does not mean letting them slide.

*Looking for quick guidance on conducting helpful feedback discussions? Read the [Saroga blog](#).*

*Nicki Roth is the co-founder of [Saroga](#), the Nonprofit Leadership Forum. Her work focuses on facilitating leadership growth. She brings decades of experience as an executive, management consultant and therapist to her nonprofit and corporate clients.*