EPISODE 7: HOW TO GIVE AND RECEIVE FEEDBACK

- [CC] Hi there and welcome to episode 7 of Engagement Matters. My name is Christina Canters and I am joined today by stakeholder engagement expert, John Williams. In this episode we're talking about, of course, feedback. John, can you share the story behind this topic, why is it important?

- [JW] Feedback is important from a number of aspects. If we use feedback well, we can achieve two really key things in the workplace. We can ensure that we keep incrementally improving our productivity, our performance, our ability to achieve things and we can also improve workshop morale, individual morale and it can also improve workplace morale, both at an individual level and across the workplace. We see three main forms of feedback. There is positive feedback: "Hey that was a really good job you did just there."

And that can be really good for boosting morale. There can be constructive feedback. "If we did X, Y and Z, we might get better results by achieving…" you know.

- [CC] It helps you improve.

- [JW] Exactly. Then there's what people often call criticism, constructive criticisms or negative feedback. The difference between criticism or negative feedback and constructive feedback, constructive feedback focuses on how we get a better outcome. Negative feedback or criticism takes the same issue in a negative way and talks about what we did wrong. So, "That wasn't a very good intro, Christina." Or, "I didn't like what you did there." I could've phrased that constructively in a different way, "If we improved the introduction, we might end up with a better podcast."

- [CC] So where do you see these different types of feedback in the work environment?

- [JW] It's interesting, we do a lot of work with not-for-profits as well as with the corporates. What we found interestingly, is the corporates are very good at constructive feedback, there's a big focus on making sure everybody keeps improving. Sometimes that creeps into negative feedback or criticism and that's not all that helpful.

But to balance too far in one direction is also not that helpful, so in another situation, we found that not-for-profits tend to attract different types of people and there seems to be an awful lot of very positive feedback going on in not-for-profits, so everybody is celebrating even small success of their colleagues, everybody is uplifted and feeling good about it.

- [CC] It's a warm, fuzzy, "Great job, that was awesome, high-five, let's eat cake."

- [JW] And that's important and that's important, but I've been told by not-for-profits, because we're balanced too far to the positive feedback and not enough constructive, it's a great atmosphere around here, but we're not really learning from our mistakes and we're not really improving as rapidly as we should. In the corporate sector, I get feedback about, oh, there's plenty of focus on incremental improvement, but boy, morale is rock bottom around here.

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- [CC] 'Cause it's all results, results, results, and not so much about the people and relationships. Also, non-for-profits it's all about, warm, fuzzy and we all love each other, but then, their productivity may not be were it should be.

- [JW] So, it's about a balance and I think every workplace, it's every employee's responsibility to worry about morale in the workplace and one of the quickest ways of boosting the morale of individuals and hence, eventually the entire workplace is by acknowledging good work when people have done it. And that might be public for some people, other people don't like public acknowledgment, so one on one might be a far better way of doing it.

But, just acknowledging that people have done a good job now and then, I'm guessing that last time you got a compliment you were walking on air the next few hours, few days perhaps.

When we get a good, genuine heartfelt compliment, when somebody has truly appreciated what we've done, it is a reconfirmation that I'm doing a good job and it is morale-boosting. And when our morale is uplifted, we might feel inclined to give somebody else a bit of a pump-up as well when they've done a good job and that can help boost the morale of them. Let's think about perhaps a bit more positive feedback around the corporate environment and perhaps in the not-for-profits, maybe let's think about how we can get some improvement. But avoiding criticism when you need.

- [CC] 'Cause that doesn't help anyone, does it? So let's talk about how we actually become really effective at giving good feedback. Let's firstly talk about giving feedback. How can someone go about doing this? 'Cause I know that, as Australians, we can often be sort of held back a little bit by giving feedback, I find especially when it's positive feedback, 'cause the tall poppy syndrome thing is rife and I've heard people openly say, "I don't want to tell them how good they are because they might get a big head."

We don't want to have them get too big for their boots, so they actually don't give them positive feedback. So, share with us how we can actually get better at it.

- [JW] Just a few hints and tips and most of our listeners would already know some of this, but it's always worth bringing it back to mind, bringing it front of consciousness. First thing is focus on behavior, not on the individual. We're talking about what the person has done, not who they are. Let's focus on the behavior and where the behavior was good, let's tell them that, that really worked well and tell them what outcome that contributed to.

Because you got off to a good start, that meant the whole of the rest flowed really well, or because you did this bit well, that resulted in this. When we're giving positive feedback or when we're giving constructive feedback, if we could've done this a little bit better, then we might have got that outcome more clearly.

- [CC] Let's say for example we're giving a colleague some feedback on how they ran a facilitation session. What would be an example of constructive feedback where you focus on the behavior and not the person?

- [JW] Okay. We might for instance take the ground rules, the ground rules and your intent were clearly good. Let's switch off our phones, let's use this structure and here's the timing, that was all good, but you didn't gain our agreement to that and I felt you were imposing that. That put me off-

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side for the rest of the workshop, and therefore you didn't get quite such good results.

I might focus on saying, "It was a good workshop and your intent was really, the content was certainly good, but we might've got a better result had we taken the trouble to agree those ground rules with all the participants rather than just impose them."

- [CC] So, you focus on, this could've been better through doing this. You're not saying it was bad, you're saying it was well-done, it could've been better if this was done.

- [JW] Yes.

- [CC] What's an example of attacking the person rather than the behavior?

- [JW] Well, taking that same point, giving it in a negative way, we might have said, "Well, you stuffed that up because you didn't gain the agreement of the people up front so they switched off."

- [CC] Yeah, it's your fault. You did something that didn't work.

- [JW] During the feedback, you got to remember, this is a dialogue, we don't want this to be, I'm telling you, this is your feedback, we want to turn this into a dialogue so sometimes it's worth getting them to give a self-assessment, "How did you feel it went?" And often they'll know what they could've done better and highlight that and they might be confident enough and say, "I think this bit went well." You're now in a dialogue where you can add to their thoughts, to make it more of a dialogue, you might also want ot give them the opportunity to give you some feedback.

And you know, why not, we're all trying to find any improvement wherever it might come from, so that would be a fair dialogue to have, "Have you got any suggestions for me?"

I think it needs to be done in appropriate circumstances, think about the person you're talking to and what is the best environment for them. Often, we probably want to do it one-to-one, in a quiet place, at a time that's appropriate, the best time to do it as soon after the incident as possible. Because then it's most fresh in the mind, for certain extrovert type people, no harm in giving them some positive feedback in front of a crowd.

They love to lap it up, but for more introverted-type people, that might be a really confronting and embarrassing situation, so you might want to think about how you might do that one-on-one.

- [CC] What about asking to give feedback? Is that something that you recommend doing, saying "Do you mind if I give you some feedback on that?" If it hasn't been asked for? 11:12

- [JW] I think it's a good idea, I think it's a good way of introducing the concept. Having said that, once you've asked the question, it's clear that you have something to say, so even if they say no, there is now an elephant in the room. I normally, I think probably, make it more of a statement that says, "I've got some suggestions for you, are you happy to..." I just turned it into a question, haven't I?

- [CC] I found that every time I've said to someone, "Do you mind if I give you some feedback?" They always say yes, they always say yes, but I feel like it's a bit more polite to do it that way

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instead of saying "You would've done better if you did this." If you sort of launch straight into it, it can be a little confronting for people, but I think if you prep them and say, "Do you mind if I give you some feedback?" "Oh, I have some feedback for you, is now a good time?" You could do it that way, I suppose.

- [JW] I was gonna say, you're talking about a transitionary tactic if you like, and it's good to have a smooth transition into it, you just got to be aware, if you are gonna ask it as a question, you got to be prepared that they might actually say no, and how are you gonna handle that yourself 'cause clearly there is an elephant in the room. But I liked what you did, when you said, "When would be a good time for me to give it?"

Because now you're making the question about a timing issue, not whether or not you're gonna give the feedback, so that's probably an easier question to ask and get the right response to.

- [CC] Let's talk about receiving feedback. Are people generally good or bad at receiving feedback?

- [JW] It varies. It varies whether it's constructive or positive feedback, I think it's fair to say that most people receive positive feedback more readily than constructive feedback. I think as a receiver, what I would urge the listeners to think about is that there is no upside for the deliverer of feedback.

They're taking time out and the only person that's really gonna benefit from this is you. So, this is a gift, receive it as such. You may not necessarily agree with what they're saying, even after you've challenged them and asked them to explain further, you may feel that you don't want to take on their feedback and that's your entitlement, but at least have the courtesy to listen through to them what their suggestion is.

Because there is no upside for them in providing feedback and they are taking a risk, there is always a concern for the feedback giver that if the other person takes this the wrong way, I might damage the relationship and I don't want to do that. I think feedback is intended to be a gift from an altruistic viewpoint. I'm not looking to get anything back for this, so at least let's give them the respect and courtesy to listen to it through.

- [CC] 'Cause a lot of people won't even give you feedback unless you ask for it.

- [JW] Exactly.

- [CC] They might sit there and go, "That was a great session" or "That could've been better", but then they'll just leave the room and not say anything.

- [JW] Yeah, exactly. What I'd like to leave you with is a thought of a technique that we have used frequently in the past, that works really well, we call it the kiss technique. K-I-S-S, stands for Keep Doing, Increase Doing, Stop Doing, Start Doing.

- [CC] Oh, so it's not Keep It Simple Stupid.

- [JW] Not that one, different one, different KISS. The idea of it is to think about the suggestions I want to make for you, what things did you do that worked well and you should keep doing, let me tell you what those things are. What things worked well and you could do more off, 'cause that

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would be even better, that's the Increase Doing.

What things are you doing that's detracting from your performance, so those are the things that you might Stop Doing. What are the things that you are not doing that would be useful to add to your repertoire, Start Doing. The thing I like about this technique is that each of the phrases finishes with the word "doing", which means it forces you to think about the behavior, not the personality. Keep doing, increase doing, stop doing, start doing.

- [CC] As opposed to "be this" or "stop being this", you're doing it instead. I like that much better than the compliment sandwich which is a little bit old-fashioned.

- [JW] It's contrived.

- [CC] Yeah, contrived and old-fashioned. I know that when I receive constructive feedback, the first impulse is to explain why I did it that way. Even if I'm, just to get defensive like that, and something that I've learned from you in your Engagement Skills workshop is to take it on-board and say, "Thank you."

And that's it, you just say thank you and you could say something like, "Thank you, I'll consider that for the next time I do bla, bla bla, I'll take that on-board, I appreciate you sharing that with me." It's really difficult because the first reaction is, "Oh, but this, I was doing it 'cause of, because of this..." I challenge anyone listening to do that next time they receive a compliment or constructive feedback to just say "Thank you."

- [JW] I think sometimes you might want to get into a broader discussion, so without being defensive, a response might be, "Thank you for that, I'll think of that, that's a really useful suggestion." And then, having thought about it, "You see, I did it this way because I was trying to achieve X, Y and Z, how can I incorporate what you suggested and still achieve that?" It's not being defensive, it's still focused on that constructive thing how can we improve.

- [CC] I like that, that's really good.

- [JW] Okay, so in summary, positive feedback, constructive feedback, focus on behavior, it's all good for the workplace. Avoid the criticism bit, and feedback can be a really useful tool both for the giver and the receiver.

- [CC] Excellent, thanks so much, John. Can I say that you've done a really, really good job with the podcasting so far.

- [JW] Thank you very much.

- [CC] Maybe I'll have you think about what you can keep doing and increase doing, start doing and stop doing.

- [JW] I'd appreciate that.

- [CC] Do you want me to share that with you in private or over the podcast?

- [JW] I think we'll do that in private first.

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- [CC] Excellent. Check out the show notes at JHW.com.au/feedback. John has a video, a really brief video that he has created which I think you should definitely watch about feedback, there is a brief summary about everything we've spoken about here, you can send that on to however you think will also benefit from this or who you think maybe should start to give some more constructive feedback. Again, that's JHW.com.au/feedback. That's all from us this week, my name is Christina Canters and this has been Engagement Matters.