



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

The Art of Feedback: Critique without Criticism

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This article was published in Asian Business in August 2001.



Consensus rather than confrontation is the norm in most Asian societies. Hence requests for opinions, or feedback, are often a cause of anxiety and even concern to all involved - those on the giving and receiving ends.

Global executives, particularly of Western origin, notice a marked difference in business meetings in Asia - how little confrontation exists and the reluctance to debate ideas. In Asia, social culture dictates that it is better, or more polite, to go along with someone rather than to challenge them openly. A key behavior to cut through such situations is the ability to critique without criticizing. Develop this ability yourself as an example to those you're working with. Critique the idea and not the person giving the idea.

For example, I have heard Asian executives remark that they recognize the handwriting on suggestion scheme cards. As if that has anything to do with

understanding the merits of the idea! Unfortunately, a statement such as that serves to reinforce people's fears that they are being watched and evaluated through the suggestions they make, whether they're good, bad or indifferent. Remarks like this prevent openness and the emergence of new ideas.

Debating an idea is an essential step towards innovation. A leader can set the pace by initially building on the positives, reinforcing the right behaviors, setting a relaxed and open environment and then demonstrating balance by highlighting some of the negative or risk elements of a specific proposition. It is generally always better to build on the propositions of others.

Leaders might set the stage at conferences or external meetings by getting the group to critique something outside their daily work. For example, it's always easy to critique the banqueting service. Demonstrate how to critique service, food quality, food selection by probing deeper. Instead of simply asking how they enjoyed the lunch, probe into what they enjoyed, what could have been better, and how they could convey these messages to the banqueting



department. This will warm a team up to giving critique and feedback in a non-threatening situation.

Critique at least one agenda item at every meeting. After critique, re-focus on the positives and close on a positive. People like positive elements, so start with the positive, share the negative and close with a positive as a recipe for giving positive feedback and critique.

By asking probing questions, leaders can get to the fundamentals of the issues at hand and un-jam the team from any focus on advocacy positions. Ask who cares if we succeed or fail. What does success or failure look like? What keeps getting in our way? If we were able to remove the barriers, would we succeed? How can we remove the barriers? Where can we start? What data will we need? How can we disprove something that we assume to be true?

We need to understand the importance of divergence before convergence. Premature convergence leads to 'group think'. Leaders should call for reasons why people support or do not support an idea, not simply whether they do or do not endorse it. By calling for reasons, you encourage a dialogue. It's important to have nay-sayers come out of the woodwork. Flush them out. There is a fine line between critique and criticism and the difference is cynicism. This is what you need to avoid. Make it safe to be a good critic.

Dissension within the Asian context has a high perceived risk, often being seen as going against the status quo and putting individualism above the group. Dissension, however, is key to developing robust knowledge and understanding our options for innovation and enhancements. From dissension and divergence come convergence, agreement and consensus.

Typically, meetings at middle and senior management level use advocacy as the primary method of communications. Very little effort is devoted to enquiry. Team members are used to advocating and defending individual points or challenging others' points. A polar opposition style

dominates where one is either in the position of defending one's point, or attacking another's. Of course, the majority remains silent and simply watches other parties advocate and attack or defend. The result is polarization and a generally low quality of new idea exploration, sub-optimizing the knowledge and creativity of the group.

Leaders can help their team to develop the skills of positive dissension by staging play debates, where members can take up the role of judge, jury, trial advocates, etc. They can encourage people to argue other aspects or other sides of a case. Playing devil's advocate is another way of introducing dissension in a positive framework. Encourage team members to build on others' ideas, rather than ridiculing them or challenging them. For example, they might say, "In support of that point, I would like to add ...", or, "Here's a third point."

By building on and developing these skills, in play debate mode or other techniques, the team leader encourages the open exchange of ideas that will soon enhance the overall creativity of the team. Feedback should be seen as an opportunity for development and not assessment or criticism. If you can overcome the fear of reprisal, and encourage suggestions and contributions, you will get more ideas and information to work with - and help to achieve your objectives faster, easier and more effectively.

About the author

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to coach leaders in Asia to respond to global economic and organizational challenges. Steve coaches and inspires chief executives and their teams within a multitude of cultures and industries to develop themselves and those around them to achieve personal goals, job satisfaction and business performance. He is one of a handful of coaches in Asia that specialize in helping leaders nurture and refine their command of the softer skills of people development and motivation.

About the company

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, coaches leaders in Asia to forge stronger teamwork at the top of the organization while fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

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