# Learn to share negative customer feedback wisely

**By ALEX LYON**

Many leaders today struggle with the rising flood of customer feedback that's instant, unfiltered, and sometimes harsh. This issue came up recently when I spoke to a group about the need for transparent conversations.

One business owner described what he was up against. Like some companies, his firm gathers almost-instant feedback. After each transaction, the customer receives an e-mail asking about his or her experience.

"We have a couple of employees who get most of the negative comments," he said. "'She rolled her eyes at me.' 'He was rude.' 'She acted like I wasn't there.' Every time I share this feedback, the employees' attitudes get worse. Should I just hide the bad news from them?"

Great question! This owner obviously cares what customers think. Not all do. As a customer, I've received numerous chances to give input to a number of companies in the past week: a store receipt with a website to rate my experience, a comment card at a restaurant, an email to rate an online transaction, a survey at the end of a phone call and so on.

I suspect many of these so-called "opportunities" would just lead to more email junk. And the questions on these surveys are nearly always a long list of the same old thing. "On a scale of 1 to 5 … how would you rate your experience?" Let's say, for example, that a customer gave you a score of 2. OK, that person didn't like it. That's all a "2" tells you, so you don't really know what changes would make a difference.

A better approach might be the one taken by the business owner mentioned earlier. He asks just a few open-ended questions like "What was the best part of your experience?" and "How can we make your experience better the next time?" Questions like these help leaders make immediate, concrete improvements and get an edge on competitors. Of course, good questions sometimes produce bad news.

People like to mention positive items, but it's especially hard for leaders to share negative news with employees. Not surprisingly, problems persist. As author and scientist Orlando Battista noted, "Nothing has more lives than an error you refuse to correct."

**GUEST OPINION**

Let's return to the business owner's question: Should you hide negative feedback from employees? No. That's not going to help in the long run.

If we want to improve, leaders must be willing to communicate bad news. To handle these conversations well, however, they must play the part of agile mediator.

For instance, we all want others to see us in the best possible light. That's why direct criticism is not likely to create positive change. In contrast, if leaders help employees save face while sharing bad news, they'll be more willing to make improvements.

Here are a few ways to boost the chances for a successful conversation:

■ First, let the employees know you have confidence in them. Assuming you still want them to work for you, tell them what you see as their strengths. Be as specific as possible.

■ Second, let them know you're sharing feedback to help them improve, not to tear them down. You might frame the conversation this way: "I've gotten my share of feedback over the years. It always stings. But it's helped me improve. That's why we look at it." This shows you're on their side and gives them a success story.

■ Third, help them be the hero. Don't dwell on everything they've done wrong. Fast-forward to the solution. Talk about how to do it right. Tell them, "It would be a great help to the organization if you handled it this way. …" They have to see the target clearly to hit it.

■ Fourth, give them hands-on practice, not just a lecture. In other words, show rather than tell. Training sticks if it feels like reality. You can simulate or role-play tricky customer scenarios. Start simply and build to tougher situations.

Finally, this advice assumes that customers give reasonable feedback. It doesn't help anyone to share comments that are cruel or overly personal. In such cases, you must referee, make a judgment call, and soften criticism that is too harsh.

Remember, customer feedback can be a powerful springboard for improvements, as long as you share bad news wisely.

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