

What can we learn from Ebay's approach to feedback?

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Tuesday, 04 March 2008
Last Updated Tuesday, 04 March 2008

If you have ever sold or bought something on Ebay you will know that members are encouraged to join a Feedback Forum. Here, users give feedback on their experience trading with other members - expressing opinions by leaving feedback on transactions.

Ebay believes that such member-to-member comments help the millions of buyers and sellers in the community build trust through sharing their trading experiences with others. Effective feedback is vital if Ebay is to provide a culture for optimum performance.

We wondered what we could learn from this approach and to what extent organizations provide mechanisms to encourage feedback within the workplace so that a culture of high performance is fostered.

Perhaps the most informal mechanism is simply giving feedback when someone does a good or a bad job. Our skill in giving feedback is important here if we are to build the community of trust to which Ebay eludes. Too often feedback is given as a complaint rather than as a means to improve performance. Similarly, when it is positive - seldom is it specific so that the individual knows exactly what it is they are doing well.

Formal tools such as suggestion boxes and performance management processes also feature in the workplace to allow us to contribute ideas and for us to review our performance with our managers.

More specifically, tools such as 360 degree feedback have been developed to give employees detailed data related to their performance. When used with care, 360 degree feedback allows individuals to understand how their effectiveness is viewed by others; his or her manager, peers, direct-reports, and customers. Most 360 degree feedback tools are also responded to by the individual in a self assessment.

At resourcing matters, we use 360°feedback as the starting point for our coaching programmes. They provide a means to explore current performance and how this is perceived by others. The gaps in perception, or blind spots, often form the basis of a development plan for future coaching.

We worked with one client at a major insurance firm who was selected to take part in a leadership development programme. The first step was to undertake a 360 feedback appraisal. His main learning was around the impact that he made; whilst he often felt motivated and excited about projects this was never perceived by others. Instead, he came across as dis-interested, having low energy and uninspiring as a leader.

Over our coaching sessions, we used this feedback and started to look for ways to make his internal enthusiasm more visible to others. After a number of months, he was promoted to take responsibility for a high profile sector and much larger team. In this world of feedback, we took this to be an endorsement of the work we had been doing; borne from the opportunity that the 360 feedback had given him.

Perhaps the parallel drawn with Ebay is too simplistic and too great a leap to expect us to rate our colleagues after each transaction but 360 degree feedback does offer us a step toward this standard.