Managing feedback and sustaining change key to your startup's success

Ever worked with foreigners? Sometimes interacting with those from other cultures and countries turns into enjoyable and meaningful encounters. Workplace diversity leads to more creativity and greater learning.

However, one side effect of heterogeneous work environments involves cross-cultural stress. Let us examine feedback. Those of us in Kenya who work alongside Europeans often notice that their direct criticism stands in sharp contrast to the Kenyan indirect softer responses. East Asians traditionally, on the other hand, will often explain intricate stories from which you must pick out the meaning and interpret it for your situation.

No matter how you prefer to receive feedback, the bottom line stands that no company can change for the better or sustain efficient operations without it.

Feedback lies at the very centre of a functioning organisation, but is often widely overlooked. Kenya seems to retain more consultants per population than anywhere in the world. Consultants give advice often by writing nifty research reports that then go and sit on institutional shelves.

However, what if you engaged a consultant or some other external or internal change agent and your real goal was the outcome of positive institutional change, not just an output goal of only obtaining the consulting report.

So, a large international NGO hires you as a consultant. During your three month engagement you notice worrying trends that could threaten the entire programme model.

On the final day, the executive team desires that you present your findings. You really care about the organisation’s mission and you want it to succeed. How do you structure your feedback in order to generate the right amount of awareness that will urge them to change?

Research shows that providing feedback must incorporate 10 characteristics in order to maximise effectiveness and yield necessary change results.

First, you must ensure that your feedback is relevant. Do not come in and tell disconnected anecdotal stories. Get relevant to the specific issues. Do not waste time explaining detailed trends in the automobile industry if your client thrives in a non-related service sector.

Consultants often attempt to relate two or more unrelated pieces of information due to laziness instead of producing solid work.

Second, make your analysis and advice understandable. If you want to show detailed regression analysis on how you recommend the entity to change, you must show it in easy graphs and charts. Do not take the verbal equivalent of a bucket of cold water dumped onto the executives by giving them too much too fast. Understandability is key.

Third, be descriptive in your criticism. You must balance the need for understandability and the necessity of description. Here in Kenya, we often love examples. If you only tell two examples of how you witnessed unhappy workers and how it made you feel the story might illicit some initial emotion. However, the effect would be short-lived. Conduct meaningful analysis. Show survey results of wide samples. Weave together a descriptive meaningful argument.

Fourth, a technique to enhance the descriptive nature of your feedback involves the use of comparisons. Compare the organisation to industry averages or to best practices for the particular sector.

Entities often do not know they lag behind competitors until confronted with comparative facts and figures. How do you find comparisons? You must move beyond merely simple Google searches. Get on the phone. Talk to competitors.

Talk to networks. Ask suppliers and buyers of the industry. Getting your client to understand comparables goes a long way towards creating the urgency for change. Fifth, make your feedback verifiable. Someone must be able to verify your comments. Many consultants live in an alternate reality whereby they feel that pulling figures out of the air will suffice.

However, savvy NGO directors and business owners have no appetite for unverifiable claims. If your feedback involves telling the NGO that it is only the sixth best functioning NGO in its sector niche, you must back it up with how you derived your conclusion.

Sixth, feedback must be limited. Do not over-tell in your attempt to achieve verifiable descriptive feedback. Executives go through each day with many issues on their minds. Their attention span for your information is limited, so therefore your advice should fit within reasonable limits.

Seventh, one way to achieve limited yet meaningful feedback involves sharing only significant findings and recommendations. Focus on significance and help keep attention spans longer.

Eighth, present your results as unfinalised. Kenyans often excel at stating that results are preliminary with finality coming only with client input. Conversely, those from western countries suffer from the “finality mentality”.

Ninth, present feedback in a timely fashion. One downfall in Kenya: people often like to delay bad news. Did you lose your friend’s spouse? How long do you wait until you tell him or her? You notice your best friend’s spouse cheating... when do you tell them?

Similarly, executives delay giving corrective action to errant employees until it is often too late for change. Likewise, consultants often delay bad news to clients. Timely is better. Feedback must occur quickly in order to maximise the change necessary from the advice. Do not let opportunities pass.

Tenth, always remember to make your feedback interesting. Tell a joke to lighten the mood. Give short examples backed by descriptive analysis. Put graphics and pictures in your slides. Add colour to your reports. The more interesting a client finds your feedback, the more likely they are too listen and act.

Next week, Business Talk explores how companies may take feedback and implement the necessary institutional change.

Ever received excellent consultant feedback? How about incompetent consultant advice? Share your experiences at #KenyaEconomics on Twitter.

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