



Dear Friend,

Tell Me What I Need to Know

It's confession time.

When I was a much younger leader, I thought I knew it all. After all, that had to be the case. I had been chosen as the leader, hadn't I? Well, you can imagine how well *that* worked!

Having gotten whacked with reality more times than I care to share, the pendulum swung in the complete opposite direction. I went through a period when I was sure that I knew nothing. Imagine getting the short straw and having to follow *that* type of leader!

At some point, common sense took over...thankfully! I realized that there are some things that I do know (and know well), and that's good. However, there are many other things that members of my team are more adept at, informed about, and closer to than I ever will be...and that's good too. So, I've learned over time (yes, the leader does learn!) to appreciate the contributions of team members and to reach out to them for input on an ongoing basis.

"Tell me what I need to know."

"Am I seeing this from all perspectives?"

"Here's where we need to go. How would you do it?"

"If we do X, how does it impact you...your work... our customers?"

You see, I've learned to take the little bit I do know, and combine it with what they know, so that together we can do good things and achieve all of our goals.

In last month's edition of **EA Insights**, we began a discussion of examining your organization in order to help it function as smoothly and effectively as possible. In Part I, we considered the management perspective. This month, in Part II, let's explore critical feedback that can be gleaned from staff members -- people whose opinions and insights often are overlooked in the strategic thinking process.

So, whether you're in a leadership position or you play another role on the team, I hope this article will help you to see some key areas in which staff impressions can be invaluable.

All the best,

June

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The Big Picture View of Business (Pt. II) Seeing Things from a *Staff* Perspective

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Often, when it's time to look strategically at how a business is doing, the entire analysis is done from the perspective of those in management. Don't get me wrong. The management outlook is an essential part of the equation, one which we considered in [The Big Picture View of Business \(Part I\)](#).



However, the management view is only one part of the equation. As we've worked with **Executive Advantage** clients, we've seen significant value in stepping back and seeking to understand how the business also is perceived through the eyes of those who are closest to day-to-day operations -- the staff.

I'll admit that this approach isn't always without pushback (at least initially); quite frankly, some leaders are reluctant to invest in soliciting staff input. Sometimes their dis-ease is an issue of respect -- leaders who don't immediately recognize the value to be found in feedback from those who carry out the business' work on a daily basis. Sometimes their dis-ease is a matter of focus -- leaders who have fished for feedback previously and have gotten everything from flat tires to old shoes, but little useful information. Sometimes their dis-ease is a matter of fear -- leaders who are uncomfortable with the prospect of getting input that may cast an ill light on them, on trusted colleagues, or on key projects.

What we've found, however, is that, when we're able to help leaders get past their initial concerns (of whatever sort), they begin to see the great worth that's wrapped up in receiving targeted input from team members. And, they get results that they realize are not to be dreaded, but to be relished and to be used to enhance everyone's success.

To get truly worthwhile information, though, the inquiry must be focused. While informal chats in the hall have their place, periodically engaging in a formal process is what's needed to gain more balanced insight. It takes a focused approach to determine staff members' real level of understanding about the organization's direction and to uncover their impressions about the progress that's being made as well as about

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"Quotes"

"There is no failure. Only feedback."
~Robert Allen

"We made some real significant progress here today. [They] gave us some positive feedback on what they liked and what they didn't like, and that's what this is about to refine and improve what we have."
~Brett Bodine

"We always welcome the feedback and the level of interest."
~Rich Dalrymple

"This should give us a good perspective on what we have to work on."
~Brett Festerling

"Employees need to understand the organizational challenges an employer has. By understanding these challenges and the changes in the workplace, an employee can take responsibility for the impact he or she has on that workplace."
~Kevin Gagan

*"We conducted our first employee opinion survey two years ago. *** We got some really good, critical feedback."*
~Joe Gallagher

"A happy employee will lead directly to happy customers."
~Chris Hammond

"We still have a lot of work in front of us, and we hope that everyone is pleased with the results."
~Karen Hendrixson

*"We hope [it] continues. *** When a group gets excited and sees the results of their hard work, they are eager to continue the work."*
~Dani Johnson

"We've had a lot of good feedback. We

the areas that are either ripe for continued growth or in jeopardy of collapse.

There's much that can be learned from staff members. And, we find it helpful to target seven areas:

Leadership. To be helpful, an inquiry regarding leadership shouldn't be focused on specific people as much as on exploring the type of guidance and direction that is present in the organization. Because staff members perform a business' work each day, it's critical to grasp whether they share leadership's knowledge and understanding of the basics. Does the staff understand the mission and vision? This is essential because ensuring that people appreciate why they do what they do pays dividends in countless ways. Do they see the senior-most leaders modeling organizational values and shaping an environment that not only aligns with current direction but also that builds the type of workplace where people are able and encouraged to do their jobs? These are components of leadership that assist in determining whether there may be gaps in organization-level leadership that inhibit effective functioning.

Strategy. Staff input related to strategy examines people's feelings of inclusion, in appropriate ways, in the development of organizational direction. Are their ideas heard and welcomed, even if all can't be used? Is there understanding of the role one is to play in carrying out strategy once it's determined? When change is necessary, do team members view the organization as nimble and able to make timely adjustments? Having strategy is wonderful, but if people don't understand it, don't embrace it, or don't feel invited to participate in strengthening it, their ability and/or desire to implement it will be hindered.

Customer Focus. Staff members, in most companies, are the people closest to customers. Given that, having a sense of how they see the organization's commitment to, interaction with, and respect for customers becomes essential. Such information uncovers areas in which customer requirements and/or expectations are not being met, and it highlights opportunities to strengthen staff training, problem-solving flexibility, and/or internal communication that ultimately serves customers well.

Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management. In any organization, staff members regularly hear that the company is collecting data about this, studying that, or watching the numbers on something else. But, how often do staff members receive any follow-up on these measurements to get a sense at the organizational, team, or individual levels about what's actually going on? Soliciting input in this area helps the company to understand whether people are getting the requisite information, in a timely manner, to do their work and to have a sense of how the business, as a whole, is doing.

Workforce Focus. In many respects, this is the most personal of the areas for staff member input. Getting a picture of the business should include getting a sense of how people feel the organization relates to them, as individuals. Do people work together effectively? Is it a safe place to work? Are people encouraged to continue professional growth and to advance their careers? Do they see the environment as one in which they are recognized for their efforts? In other words, do people care? Staff members make a significant investment of time and effort in work each day; don't underestimate the importance of their perceptions of the organization's reciprocal investment in them.

Operations Focus. If you've ever been asked to do a job but you've not been given the tools you need to do that job, then you know the frustration involved first-hand. Frustration within an organization is contrary to progress and teamwork, and inquiries about operations disclose this type of information. Operations-oriented feedback yields vital feedback about where the infrastructure is working, and where correction is needed, all in an effort to have the work carried out smoothly and successfully.

Results. The bottom line is the bottom line. Executives often know how the business is doing in key areas. However, how much of this do staff members know? Staff understanding of key results is especially important in the areas that impact how they do their jobs, how they relate to customers, and how confident they can be with the stability and commitment of the organization (which enables them to be effective in the two former areas).

Want to know how *your* business is doing? Don't neglect scrutinizing the operation from a staff perspective. What you learn about the strengths, as well as the challenges, related to actual functioning and/or perceptions can be invaluable to advancing your work, building a solid team, and leading well.

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hope to incorporate it in our plan."
~Stephen Kaufman

"We have received feedback from employees both formally ... as well as through some informal channels[.]"
~Sean McHugh

"Really, this offers a way to look at truth from a different perspective. If we always look at things from the same view, we can become [biased]. But a new perspective can always be invigorating."
~David Payne

"You can't always see things for what it is if you just stare at it[;] sometimes you have to step back, look at things from a different perspective and ask questions."
~Leonardo Ruiz

"How we manage and lead this organization is absolutely impacted by the feedback we get from our ... employees."
~Steve Russell

"It is unique to find someone who has a thoughtfulness about team dynamics, perspective on what is working and what needs improvement, and at the same time, individual success."
~Ryan Sullivan

"Experience is a wonderful thing, but sometimes you need a new perspective."
~Elaine Taylor

"You must look within for value, but must look beyond for perspective."
~Denis Waitley

What Should We Cover?



Do you have questions or topics that you'd like to have us cover in an upcoming issue of EA Insights?

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