

Executives Need Feedback

In a recent McKinsey Quarterly article adapted from his new book, *What to Ask the Person in the Mirror: Critical Questions for Becoming a More Effective Leader and Reaching Your Potential* (Harvard Business School Press, August 2011), Robert S. Kaplan, a professor of management practice at Harvard Business School, discusses how important it is for top executives to receive feedback.

By the time you become a senior executive, you have no doubt honed a set of skills and talents that enable you to be effective in your job. To help you get to this point in your career, you likely had coaches and mentors who closely monitored your progress, prodded you to develop your talents, and, when necessary, confronted you with criticisms that you may not have wanted to hear but needed to hear to continue your upward path.

However, as executives become more senior, they are less likely to receive this type of constructive performance and strategic feedback. Kaplan offers steps that an executive can take to get greater ownership of the feedback process and improve their ability to build their organization, capabilities, and career.

- **Cultivate a network of junior coaches**
Write down a realistic assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. List five subordinates who could give you specific feedback—particularly about your weaknesses. Meet with each person individually and explain that you need their advice. Ask them to identify at least one or two tasks or skills they believe you could improve upon. Ask follow-up questions. Encourage your direct reports to do this same exercise with their direct reports.
- **Practice self-disclosure**
Write down one or two fundamental facts about yourself that would, if disclosed, help subordinates understand you better. This might include something about your personal story, upbringing, likes, passions, pet peeves, aspirations, or worries. Find opportunities to share this information.
- **Improve your ability to frame and discuss key questions**
Identify a handful of key questions that your team should debate and discuss. Make a habit of writing down one or two such questions before leading team meetings and engaging in one-on-one discussions. When facilitating group discussions, take care to frame key questions, actively listen to the responses, and foster debate. Immediately afterward, write down what you learned and identify appropriate next steps.
- **Assess your business with a “clean sheet of paper”**
Select a small team comprising your next generation of leaders. Ask them to examine a specific issue or assess your enterprise as if they could start from scratch. Select team members based on your company’s succession plan—including potential successors for your own job as well as for your direct reports. Frame the issues and ground rules for this group up-front, and make sure it is allowed to operate independently (without your influence) until it reports its findings. Encourage subordinates to try this exercise in their own areas of responsibility.

These steps can help build a coaching environment for senior leaders. It allows you to get coaching that is grounded in the strategic needs of the business and is also an excellent way to take a fresh look at your company. It reinforces the need for leaders to have the courage to frame the right questions and ask for help from their people. Combined with strong individual coaching processes, these steps can help build a powerful competitive advantage for your organization.