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EASY AND PRODUCTIVE FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Welcome to The Highly Valued Leader podcast where I make it simple for leaders at all levels to amplify their value. My name is Mel Savage and I went from working in the mailroom at a small ad agency to making multiple six figures in senior management at McDonald's, to running my own multiple six-figure executive coaching business. I've had huge successes in my career and epic failures. All of it taught me the world-class leadership, mind and skill sets that I simplify for my clients and share with you on this podcast. I'll help you reset your leadership style, demystify the politics, and help you become the highly valued leader everyone wants on their team. Get ready for the most honest, direct and revolutionary leadership coaching you've ever heard. Let's simplify leadership together.

Welcome back, leaders. Today we're talking about feedback, and how to really use feedback to grow your people. When I say feedback, a lot of the times all I hear is *'I don't want to do this... It's not easy... I don't like giving feedback... It's hard to give feedback...'* So many people screw it up; I've screwed it up a million times. The reason that feedback is not something that we prioritize necessarily as one of the most important things that we do, is because sometimes it feels like you're hurting people's feelings.

Nobody wants to hurt anybody. It feels like we have to let people down or tell them that they're wrong and that we're going to hurt them. Or maybe we're not going to deliver it properly and it's kind of blowback on us or whatever it is so we just avoid doing it because it's not fun sometimes. We think it's not fun. It's normal that your brain doesn't want to do things that we don't consider fun. But here's the thing–we can't control how people feel, we can't control how people receive the feedback or what we say as part of a feedback discussion. But what you can control is how you show up for that discussion, and how to set yourself up for success.

Because there are lots of ways to set yourself up for success and actually make feedback one of your favorite things to do, one of the favorite things that your team loves to do with you. It can be that thing. It can be something that truly, your team and you consider part a key tool of their growth. We're not just saying that because it sounds good on a poster like *'Feedback is a great tool for growth.'* But it actually becomes that in your team. If you could actually achieve that, what would it mean for you and your team? Because feedback is necessary.

As leaders, it's our job to figure out how to do it. We need to have feedback discussions all the time to help people grow, get people on track, get situations back on track, get projects back on track, develop strategies, and identify when things aren't working. And we need to help them work better. I know I keep saying feedback as a tool but so often, we use or think about feedback as a weapon. We don't think about it as a weapon, but because we're worried about hurting people when we give it or we're worried that they're going to take it the wrong way, it almost feels like it is kind of something sharp, that we don't want to hurt people with.

The more you think about feedback as a tool and not a weapon, the easier it's going to get. But I'm also saying that's not enough, you need more than that. So today we're going to talk about a few things. We're going to talk

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about how to use feedback as a tool, not a weapon; how to use it to inspire people versus deflate them; how to use it to create a connection with someone and build trust with someone versus creating conflict and mistrust, which happens so often. And the most important thing, the core of your job is how to use feedback to grow critical thinkers on your team. It's so so important.

When you are building relationships and connections, building trust, and growing the people up, down and across, by the way, not just the people who report to you, when you're doing that, you will deliver results. You will create influence not just with your reports, but with other folks as well. And you will create loyalty. You will create retention on your team. You will create people who want to work on you. You will create situations where you get invited to be on special projects and special task forces because you know how to give feedback in a way that actually like I said, inspires, connects, and grows.

You will hear me from time to time slipping into that terminology, giving feedback. I know I keep using that; I've been saying that for years and years. But even that terminology could use a little bit of an update. And I do not want to just semantically use words like *constructive feedback* versus *negative feedback*; I want to use words for what they actually mean. When we say give feedback, that's part of the problem. We see it as something we give somebody; we are offering them something.

And really, that in and of itself is the mindset we need to change. We are not giving feedback, we are discussing feedback. We are discussing something that happened, and how to do it differently next time. When you've put yourself in a position of authority to give someone feedback because you think you know better and you have all the answers, all of a sudden, there's a disparity in the discussion. It's not as open; it's not as safe. Yes, you are their boss. And so it's going to be your job to actually peel away a little bit of that authority at the moment.

Because what you want to be able to do is create a trusted two-way dialogue about the situation, particularly when something goes wrong. And you'll also hear me talk about this–something went wrong; the person is not wrong. That's a mindset shift. I'll bring it up again later, which I want you to think about because that's often what gets in the way. We think the person has done something wrong versus something that went wrong that the person was involved in. Yes, they may have been part of something being wrong with the process. But nothing's wrong with them.

It's the same thing I say to people who may think they're afraid of failing. I always say failure is a process. Something in the process failed, but you're not a failure. Even if you are the one who was part of the failing process, you're not a failure. It's a process error. And it's the same thing here. Something went wrong with the process that included something the person did, but that doesn't make them wrong, a failure, or bad as a human being. It's just, you know what? let's fix what went wrong in the process here.

The more as leaders and as human beings, we can separate the process from the person, the more that we can look at the process as the problem and not the person as a problem. What happens a lot is we make people a problem. And that's what makes feedback so difficult when you think the person is the problem. But the person's not the problem; it's their process that's a problem. I'm going to leave that with you. The two things there are one–we don't give feedback, we discuss it. It's a two-way dialogue. So think about changing your language there. And secondly, the person is never the problem; it's always something going on with the process.

There are lots of different strategies for how to manage feedback and use it as a tool with your team. I have seven different strategies and if I don't get through them today, I'll save some for another time. I'm going to be

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using three real scenarios that my clients have presented to me as examples throughout different parts of the podcast.

One of the scenarios was my client's report was talking about my client behind her back and my client found out about it, and we're going to talk about how to give feedback in that situation. Another one is when a client asked me how to give a tough review to someone with potential. We're going to talk about that. And then another one was just a client who wanted to grow the impact and capability of her team by using feedback but was very uncomfortable using it.

We're going to talk about those three scenarios on and off throughout some of the strategies I want to share with you. The goal really is that, as I said, feedback becomes easy. It's productive, it's fun, and it's not something that you worry about, it's something that you make time for. As I go through these seven strategies, you don't have to use them all, these are just different strategies that you can use, and then you can put your own process together on what makes sense for you and your situation.

The first strategy that I want to share is basically just intentionally deciding why you want to instigate a feedback discussion. In your words, why you're giving the feedback in the first place? Usually, the answer is someone did something wrong; at least that's what we're telling ourselves. That's what our brain is initially feeding us–someone did something wrong. So you need to check that.

When I say decide why you want to have the discussion, what I mean by that is intentionally deciding the reason that's going to be the most effective reason for the discussion. If the reason is this person did something wrong or is wrong or needs to do things differently, then that might not be the best reason going in. One of the most powerful skills of a leader is learning to choose the mindset that they want to have to get the result that they want.

So the mindset going into the feedback discussion is actually more important than what you say. Because if your mindset is, what a pain in the ass, why are they doing this, why can't they get this, this-person-is-wrong type of mentality, then it doesn't matter what you say, or how much you pretend to be able to be kind. That's going to seep through your energy. You can say all the perfect words. But if your tone and you know this to be true, if your tone isn't right, it's not going to land.

On the other hand, if you are in a mindset of supportiveness, kindness, safety, and collaboration, then again, it doesn't matter what you say because your energy is going to land. The energy that you go into this with, the reason that you're giving this feedback or having this feedback discussion is the most important thing. So when you say to yourself, *'This person did something wrong'*, that's very different than *'This is an opportunity to improve someone's results.'* It sounds like the same thing but the intention is very different.

Actually, when you even say the sentences, the feeling that those sentences generate is very different. '*I want to help someone improve their results'* just feels softer. It feels more open than *'Someone did something wrong. And now I have to tell them not to do it again.'* That feels much sharper and much harsher in terms of the energy going into it. So if you have any kind of feeling that sharp and harsh about the person, my suggestion is to stop and reground yourself in your thinking, and really work on your emotional intelligence in terms of choosing the attitude that you want to enter the feedback discussion with.

If you're just going in there to check something off your list or get something off your chest and then move on to the next thing, the result from that is going to be usually impatience. And that's not a place you want to give good

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feedback from. You don't want to give it from judgment, impatience, stress, anxiety, or frustration. It will not land. You always want to be able to give feedback from curiosity, openness, compassion, and collaboration; that kind of place. You want to be able to get to that kind of feeling and manage your thoughts accordingly to help you get there.

I'll give you the example of my client who found out her report was bad-mouthing her behind her back. It would have been easy to ignore it. It would have been easy to go into the feedback discussion with the intention of *gotcha and don't do it again* sort of thing. When my client came to me, she was like, this happened and she was disappointed and sad about it. Anyway, she's not the type of person to get really angry, but she was probably a little bit frustrated by the situation, for sure. And she knew that if she went into it with that type of attitude, it wouldn't get anywhere with this person.

Her initial inclination, if I remember correctly was maybe just to let it lie. But this was a really great opportunity to actually build a connection with this report. Because what we ended up talking about was having her intention to really be figuring out what's going on with the person. Because really, people only badmouth their boss or complain when they're feeling insecure or threatened. If we really get down to it, when people are feeling insecure or threatened, they act out that way.

Rather than saying, *"Don't talk about me behind my back"* and accusing the person, it's more like *"Look, I heard this. And I want you to know it's okay, I'm not mad at you. What I'm really concerned about is what is driving the need for you to do that. Let's talk about it."* And talk specifically about the things that were said. Maybe there is an issue there that needs to be addressed in terms of your style as a boss if this is happening to you.

Or in terms of my client's style, but also just understanding *"At the end of the day, we're a team. And no matter what each of us says about each other, it reflects poorly on the person saying it and on the team. And we need to work together. So what is it that's not working?"* Not like, *"What is it that's not working for you?"* It's more like, *"So obviously, something isn't working for you. Let's talk about what it is."* That comes from compassion; that comes from not putting yourself first or putting the needs of the person you are mentoring, guiding, growing, leading, putting that person's needs first, sitting down and getting curious.

It would have been really easy to get defensive and angry, where most of us would go in that situation. Let yourself get defensive and angry. I'm not saying don't get defensive and angry. Go there, if you need to, if that's the reaction you're having. Just don't take any action from that place. Let yourself calm down, and then say, *what is my goal?* That was what we discussed. What's the goal that you have with this person? What is the goal that you have for this person? What do you want this to end up looking like? *'I want us to be a team.'*

Well then, as a team, you have to understand each other. Maybe she's not emotionally intelligent enough, or she's caught up in whatever she's going through, but she's not able to understand you. Now, it's your job to understand her. That's our job as leaders. It's to be emotionally stronger than our people so that we can help them get to where they need to be. So always decide why you're having this feedback discussion, first and foremost, and then get into that mindset to be able to have a discussion that's about the other person to help them sort through what they're going through, or where the mistake was, or whatever. That's the first strategy.

The second strategy I want to talk about is making it safe, like creating safety in the dialogue. Continuing with this one example was really important for my client to create safety with her report. *"Hey, you know what? I'm not mad at you. I want you to know..."* Because right away the report was like, *"Who said that? I didn't say that."* We get defensive, and just take it off the table. *"It doesn't matter that something happened there. And I'm not holding it*

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against you. I actually want to understand if there is something there. You're my team, I have your back. So I hear this, and I think something's going on. I need to have my person's back. I need to figure out what's going on with them so that I can help them get through it."

This is me paraphrasing a discussion in the case of this person, but what does it like for you to create safety? Think about some feedback that you want to give someone. How are you creating safety for them? Because when you don't create safety, the other person is not going to enter into a discussion with you; they're going to shut down because they're going to be afraid you're the boss, or you're more senior than them in some capacity. They're going to be afraid to be honest with you. You need to level the playing field so they can be honest.

They need to see there is no threat there because authority equals threat in those situations. They're not going to know, they need to hear it from you. They don't need to just feel it from you. Feeling it from you is important, but they also need to hear from you that it is safe. And you need to do whatever you can to create safety so that it can be a two-way conversation or it's just going to be you talking and asking questions and the other person agreeing with you, or clamming up. So make sure you make it safe.

Number three, seek to understand. This is so important because oftentimes when we see something happening, we will just assume that what we know and understand about the situation and our point of view on the situation is actually the fact. I don't know about you, but how many times have you entered into a situation where you didn't have all the facts? And then you kind of feel like an idiot afterwards because you said some things that may be brought up from frustration or anger that you shouldn't have said. I do that with my husband all the time.

It's really good to just really get to a place of curiosity. This is part of a discussion. When you're discussing something with somebody, you don't assume you have all the answers so you would just simply say, *"Look, I heard this..."* In the case of my client, *"I heard this, what's going on? Is that what was said? What's your point of view on this? What's your take on what happened in that situation?"*

Even if something goes wrong, let's say it's a peer where they've said something about you, or they've disagreed with something you said, or you guys are butting heads in a meeting, seek to understand and go around afterwards. *"Hey, you know what? In that meeting, I could feel the tension. And I want to maybe apologize for your part in it, or I was kind of feeding into it, too. But I really want to understand where you're coming from. Can you help me understand where you're coming from?"* In that way, when you seek to understand what's really going on with the person, then your feedback becomes richer. Your solution in the case of a peer becomes richer, and the odds that you end up in a better place are higher; seeking to understand.

If we go to that second example I was giving you, which was, my client, asking me about how to have a tough conversation in a review with a person with potential. In that case, it's not like, *'You're not doing this, you're not doing that… Get it going.'* It's like, *'Okay, this is where we talk about starting…'*, which was just seeking to understand what's going on with them. Actually, where we started was creating a safety review. It's like, *'We're going to have a review today. We're talking about some things…'* And she just sort of set it up about how she really believes in this person and wants to support them.

So it took all of the *'you're in shit'* off the table, basically. And then say, '*Here are some things that I'm seeing that are going on. Tell me what's going on with you. What's your point of view on this? I want to understand what's in your mind, basically.'* And then that opens up the discussion where the person can start to pipe in when the threat is off the table and they see that not only you support them, but you're asking them their opinion. It's so

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important to have a really rich conversation. And all of a sudden, the conversation doesn't become tough. That was another thing that my clients and I talked about.

First of all, let's stop calling it a tough conversation. It's just a conversation about someone's performance with the intention of helping them improve their performance. It's not tough; it doesn't have to be tough. Because you're going to make it safe. You're going to seek to understand. It's going to be a discussion where you collaborate and resolve what the next steps are. You do that all the time with all the other things that you do during the day. You can do it with people, too.

Sometimes people take things personally. I've been queen of having done that in my life too, where someone gives you feedback, and you take it personally. You can make space for that, as a boss, if someone takes it personally. You could have empathy for that, where you like, *'I totally understand why you might be taking it personally.'* You can just respond to how they're feeling. *'I totally understand why you seem a little upset by this. I would be, too. Let's talk about it... What's upsetting you?... It's okay. However, you're reacting is okay...'* And then just go back to safety. *'I want you to know, get it all out. It's not a problem. This is a safe space to do that. I'm supporting you. I want you to be able to do all the great things I know you're capable of doing…'* Whatever it is, I'm speaking in general terms.

Let me just summarize very quickly. Decide why you're giving the feedback, make it safe, seek to understand and as you're having the conversation, my recommendation is to let the feedback receiver, and when I say receiver, I mean the other person because it's not really about giving and receiving feedback; it's a collaborative discussion. Let the other person decide what they want to do next. And in the case of a review, it can start with what's the objective. *'So this is what's going on. We've talked about it. We understand why. What do you want it to look like? If we were going to set some goals for you over the course of the next six months, or three months, or the next month, what do you want it to look like at the end of this month or the next three months?'* And then talk about how to get there together? Let them lead. Ask them the question.

In the case of the person talking behind the other person's back, I would just say, *'So what do you want to do about it? How do you want to go forward as a team? How can I support you?'* You can ask those questions, always. And if they don't know, you can offer up some suggestions. You might get a lot of *I don't know*, especially if you've not been doing this with them before. And when people say '*I don't know',* I always will challenge them to try to come up with something.

But if they really can't, and it's getting uncomfortable, I'll just say, *'Do you mind if I offer you some suggestions?'* Then I'll offer one or two. And then I'll say, *'Which ones resonate with you? Is there anything here that resonates with you?'* And if something does resonate with them, ask them. Don't let them off the hook, just take your suggestions and run with it. Ask them why it resonates. Ask them how they would do it. You want to really get them thinking about their own feedback, and really taking the lead on who they want to be.

Because when they take the lead on who they want to be, they're more apt to do it, versus you telling them what they need to do next. It's the same in coaching sessions. If I tell my clients what to do, they're less likely to do it. Then they decide what really resonates with all the things I've said or whatever they've come up with, what's really resonating, where it lands, where they want to go forward from here.

Let's talk about the sixth strategy, which is what I call *when you see something, say something*. I know the context in which that terminology has been used, generally speaking. I want to tell you the way I mean it. It's when I see something going sideways, or I see someone either not doing their best or not performing in a way I know they

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could perform, or I see something about to go sideways, or I see something going great is another one, which we'll talk about in a second.

But most importantly, when I see someone's face, like when I see someone reacting in a way where I can see something behind their face, but they're not telling me what it is, that's when I stop. I don't wonder what they were thinking. I don't assume what people are thinking. I don't always let it play out and let them fall in their flight base. When I see something, I say something; but always from a curious place.

Let's say I'm talking to somebody in a feedback discussion. And I see their reaction or their discomfort, I'll just say very honestly, *'You seem a bit uncomfortable. Tell me what's going on with you.'* And you see how I'm saying it is really one of caring, compassion, and curiosity. I really want to know. And you can say those same words from frustration. *'I can see you're frustrated. What's going on with you?'* You're not going to get an answer to that question.

But when you say, *'I can see you're frustrated, or I can see you're upset. Tell me what's going on with you. I'm here for you.'* It's a very different response. You're going to get a different response from that. When I see someone getting angry, *'I can see this isn't sitting well yet. Tell me what's going on. What are you thinking?... I can see that you're having a reaction to what I'm saying. Tell me what's going on.'* Say it like you want to know because you actually care.

Now my third client example that I had talked about, was, that my client wants to be able to use feedback to help grow her people. In addition to all the other strategies I've shared with you, this is really an important one for her. It's making sure that she is opening up the dialogue for feedback discussions as much as possible. Whether it's trying to be empathetic and aware of how people are feeling; whether she sees someone in a meeting getting frustrated and pulls them aside after and has the discussion, or sees someone acting out in frustration, anger, shutting down, or whatever pulling them aside and getting curious, making it safe, getting curious about what's going on, why they acted that way, or why they did that thing, you need to make time.

This was another thing we worked on with this client. It was making time in her schedule for just being able to give feedback, and you have to have a lot of open time in your schedule for that. That means you can't be going from meeting to meeting to meeting to meeting, which is a whole other discussion for another day. But they work in tandem. You have to create the space in your calendar to lead, to give feedback to your people. But the biggest thing is when you see something, say something.

A lot of what I've been talking about in this podcast today has been in support of how to give negative feedback or what we call constructive feedback, but I don't like calling it constructive feedback because that means we forget that positive feedback is also constructive. And that's actually my seventh strategy. It's positive feedback is constructive, too. But constructive feedback, as I often say, is anything that constructs someone, and that can be a discussion on the back of something that didn't go as well as it could have, or like something was wrong in the process.

You can construct someone by giving them feedback, offering feedback, or having a feedback discussion about what's working in the process. It's not always about what's not working in the process. And that's maybe a better way to say it than positive and negative. It's like, *'Let's have a discussion about what didn't work. Let's have a discussion about what did work.'* Instead of positive and negative and constructive and growth feedback, or whatever it is. I'm always struggling to find the right words.

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Just calling it *what didn't work* and *what did work* is really in essence what we're talking about. What are the steps in the process that you're taking that aren't working right now, and what can we do differently to help you make it work? That's all we're trying to do; it's to help things work. And if we focus on that, that's great. Now, where does positive feedback come in? And this was a big part of my conversation with my client about using feedback.

I've read lots of HBR articles and different articles about how often you get positive feedback. I mean, five times as much as what they call negative feedback. Let's call it *what's working feedback*. You should give what's working feedback all the time, every day. Give yourself a goal to give 10 pieces of what's working feedback every day, as you walk around and make it constructive. What's working feedback can be constructive.

For instance, with my client, we were texting back and forth about something and she said, and I told her what a great job she did. I said, *so why did she do a good job?* And my client answered me, and I said, *why did you tell her that?* That's constructive. When you say to someone, *"Hey, can do you have a second? I want to have a discussion with you about the meeting."* And of course, the person is coming to you going, *"Oh my God, no. What happened? I screwed something up."* And you say, *"If it's okay, I want to tell you what a great job you did in that meeting. And here's why."* And pull out why.

There are so many good things that come out of that. One is they love hearing it; it's so awesome But also, most importantly, you are reinforcing the behaviors that you want to see. When someone is getting a dopamine hit from you because you're giving them this amazing feedback or sharing this amazing feedback with them, they're going to want that dopamine hit again. And they're going to do this amazing behavior again and again and again. That's why you cannot give enough what's working constructive feedback.

With what's working feedback, is it a discussion? Sometimes it can be, like I just said, you can bring them into a room and have a discussion with them, and get them to talk about what worked in the meeting even like, *"Hey, let's talk about what you think worked."* And then they can tell you and then you can tell them. And it can be a really great discussion if you have time for it.

With what's working feedback, you have a little bit more latitude to just share it with them. But where you can have a discussion, make it a discussion. What's more awesome than having a discussion where you and your boss talk about how great you are? How often does that happen? That's going to build a connection. That's going to build trust. That's going to inspire people to be better at their jobs. That's going to drive results and that's what you're there for, to help them think about what they're doing and get results through your team.

Those are my seven strategies. I cannot believe I got through all seven. I really want you to know how much I was holding back, not giving you. I definitely can go down rabbit holes with things. I was holding back but hopefully, I gave you enough texture on each of those seven strategies to be able to kind of give you places to start and think about how you would use them in your situation in your life, or maybe where you're not using them. And that's going to help create awareness for you. So definitely decide why you want to have the discussion and who you want to be for that discussion. The mindset for the feedback is more important than the feedback itself.

And always remember, something went wrong versus someone is wrong. Don't make the person the problem. Number two, make it safe for them. Create a safe environment to have a two-way dialogue. You have to even out the playing field, and take away this whole level of authority so that you can actually have a chat about it. Seek to understand what happened. Make sure you don't assume you're right and have the whole story. Really try to understand what's going on from the other person's point of view. And then let the other person decide what they

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want to do next. Give them the option. If you need to feed them some suggestions, get their feedback on those suggestions. Get them to tell you why they like your suggestions. That's going to help their critical-thinking mind.

Then, of course, when you see something, you say something, all the time. What's working and what's not working kind of way, make the time for the discussion. That's how you're going to grow people. And the more that you have these really great two-way conversations, the more people are going to want to have them with you. They're going to see how they're growing as people and people love to grow.

Every single one of my clients has a desire to grow. And that's just not because they're special, but because as human beings we want to grow, we want to do better. So help them do that. And those what's not working discussions, peppered with a lot of what is working discussions are going to be great. People are going to want to have these discussions with you. We want to have positive feedback. Positive feedback, what's working feedback, whatever, just make sure that you make it constructive.

That's what I have for you today. I'm really proud of myself, by the way for getting it all in and not making this a two-hour podcast. The key takeaway that I want to underline in all of this is to make sure that you're thinking about not giving feedback. If anything else, stop trying to give feedback, and make feedback a discussion.

Okay, my friends. That's what I have for you this week. Talk to you soon. Bye for now.

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