

Want to Be a Better Leader? Ask for More Feedback!



“Sometimes people don’t want to hear the truth because they don’t want their illusions destroyed.” –Friedrich Nietzsche

Arbinger Global Partner Cobus Pienaar and his colleague, Petrus Nel, begin their latest article on leadership and the importance of feedback with the above quote from Nietzsche. They find that good leaders are self-aware: They want to hear the truth, so they ask for feedback. They find out how they’re really impacting others and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Conversely, poor leaders aren’t interested in the truth. They discount feedback that doesn’t fit with their existing self-image, and therefore do not improve. Their performance suffers.

Drawing on Arbinger’s inward/outward mindset framework in conjunction with other research, Pienaar and Nel show that poor leaders tend to fall into one of four styles: ‘I am better than,’ ‘I deserve,’ ‘I am worse than,’ and ‘I must be seen as.’ For those of you familiar with Arbinger’s work, you’ll notice these four styles are the different ways of being ‘in the box.’ When we’re in the box, we are self-focused and blame others for our problems.

What Happens When Leaders Ignore Feedback?

The article describes two great examples of leaders discounting feedback from inside the box, both from [case studies by leadership scholar K. Blakely](#). In the first example, a leader developed a vision for his organization and 'enforced' its implementation. When employees began resisting the vision, explaining why it wouldn't work, he 'dismissed their insights' and said they were 'unappreciative of his efforts.' He was in the box of 'I am better than,' believing his vision was superior to everyone else's. From inside that box, he rejected important feedback, learned nothing, and likely made little headway on his vision. The second example talks about a leader whose people experienced her as 'cold' and 'aloof.' They wanted her to be more involved with the team. But the leader believed her authority would be undermined if she got too close to her employees—she thought they would think her incompetent and weak. She swung between the 'I am worse than' and 'I must be seen as' boxes and would not consider changing her management style. Again, this leader rejected feedback, learned nothing, and failed to become a better leader.

We can only imagine the low morale, disengagement, and resistance that resulted from these two leaders' inward mindsets.

Implications for Leaders

So we see that feedback can give us important information about how we're affecting our colleagues. If we seek the truth about our impact on others, we can adjust in helpful ways—which benefits ourselves (as professional development) and those we interact with (we make their jobs easier).

But asking for feedback can be scary! What if we hear something we don't like? As a first step, consider asking a trusted colleague for feedback—someone you know who cares about you and will 'tell it like it is.' Make sure to get yourself to a place of genuine curiosity before you approach them. Really consider what they say. Sit on it for a bit. Then think about one or two small changes you could make. Try them out and see what happens!

If that works, ask a few more people—including but not limited to your boss. We tend to get lots of feedback from above; we usually don't need much more. Instead, think about approaching your coworkers, direct reports (if you have any), and customers (internal and external). Again, think of one or two small changes you could make. Try them out, see what happens, and adjust as needed.

Over time, your self-awareness will increase and you'll start to see some real benefits from your new ways of working. Interested in reading the full article? You can find it [here](#) in the South African Journal of Human Resource Management.