When feedback isn't landing due to Motivation (3 mins)
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You're at the helm of a skyrocketing startup. You've given crystal-clear feedback to a pivotal team member and provided all the resources they might need — from time to finances. Yet, nothing changes.

The answer might be in the Three Cs of Feedback Dynamics.

1. Clarity - Is your feedback request clear, behavioral and unambiguous?
2. Capability - Does the feedback recipient have the tools and skills required to act?
3. Caring - Do they have the motivation or drive to follow through?

While we've previously delved into Clarity and Capability, today's spotlight is on the often overlooked but equally critical 'Caring', also known as motivation.

Here are some reasons why your team member might not be responding to feedback:

1. **You're not using the right Currency**

People are driven by different motivators, both internal and external. A common error is assuming everyone is motivated by the same factors. However, while you might care deeply about efficiency, your feedback recipient might be more excited about opportunities to learn.

Allan Cohen and David Bradford in their book "Influence without Authority" call these different motivators "Currencies". There are five buckets of Currencies:

1. **Inspiration**: Vision, Excellence, Moral/ethical correctness
2. **Task**: New resources, Challenge/learning, Assistance, Organizational support, Rapid response, Information
3. **Position**: Recognition, Visibility, Reputation, Insiderness/importance, Contacts
4. **Relationship**: Understanding, Acceptance/inclusion, Personal support
5. **Personal**: Gratitude, Ownership/involvement, Self-concept, Comfort

Some examples of how these currencies might show up:

- A key employee might avoid working late hours because they need and value *family connection time. (Currency: Relationship)*
- An emerging leader might not change strategies because they have a need *to be seen as a leader who projects stability and decisiveness. (Currency: Self-concept)*
- The CEO might retain a close associate because she has a need *to stay in her Zone of Genius*, and the associate handles tasks the CEO finds draining. *(Currency: Excellence)*

Action Steps:

Engage in detective work to uncover currencies: Observe what your feedback recipient seems to care about. What do they say when they resist changing their behavior? What language do they use? Conversely, when have they gotten excited and motivated in the past?

Ask, listen and empathize: Engage your feedback recipient in a genuine conversation. Instead of seeing the lack of action as resistance, try to understand their underlying needs through gentle interviews. Ask open-ended questions like, "Can you help me understand your reservations?".

Brainstorm: Once you've uncovered their motivational currency, brainstorm together. What creative tactics can you come up with that serve their needs as well as the startup's objectives?

For Instance:
If their currency is gratitude, you might try writing them a heartfelt handwritten note, expressing your thanks in person, sending flowers, or acknowledging their contributions in public.
Caution: The currency you use has to be authentic; an insincere thank you note might actually harm motivation!

2. **The Feedback Feels Threatening**

Let's face it, receiving criticism, even if it's constructive, can feel like a punch to the gut. According to David Rock, humans instinctively respond defensively to perceived social threats that can be triggered by feedback. In his SCARF model, these threats can take the form of the following:

- Status: "After this feedback, do my colleagues still respect me?"
- Certainty: "Does this mean I'm not suited for this startup anymore?"
- Autonomy: "They're trying to control how I work."
- Relatedness: "I thought we were a team. Is that changing?"
- Fairness: "This criticism feels undeserved."

Action Step:

Identify which aspect of the SCARF model your feedback might trigger - Ask the recipient what they are concerned about, then empathize and make them feel heard. If they are reluctant to share their concern, take a guess at what matters to them!
Either way, address the perceived threat by stating your authentic positive intent. Once they feel less threatened and fearful, they'll be more receptive to your feedback.

For instance:

For threats to **Autonomy** you might say, "I value your unique approach. *My feedback isn't to control but to discuss alternatives*. How do you see yourself implementing these changes?"

For threats to **Status**, consider saying, "Your role in our startup is pivotal. *This feedback is to ensure we're maximizing our collective potential."*

If you can lean into your team member's motivational currency and reduce social threat from SCARF factors, you might just find that they are more inclined to act on your feedback!

Finally, one exercise I'd recommend is **The "Cheering for Learning to Walk" Exercise:** Notice every small positive step your feedback receiver takes, and celebrate it. Do not give any constructive feedback for a few days. This breaks the habit of constantly focusing on the negative.

- When my daughter first learned to walk, I cooed and clapped every time she stood up or took a step. At no point did I chastise her for falling down. Apply the same principle to adults, including SVPs! Celebrate each step they take towards improvement, no matter how small, and you'd be surprised at how quickly behaviors shift. Yes, this means more frequently than at annual reviews.
- This is a surprisingly hard exercise. Most of us are hard-wired to give constructive feedback. Remind yourself that frequent positive reinforcement boosts morale and encourages change.

TLDR: In the fast-paced world of startups, effective feedback is critical. If your feedback isn't landing, work through the three Cs - Clarity, Capability and Caring - to see what's causing resistance.

What do you do when feedback isn't landing?

Reference Notes:

Allan Cohen and David Bradford, Currencies concept

David Rock, SCARF model