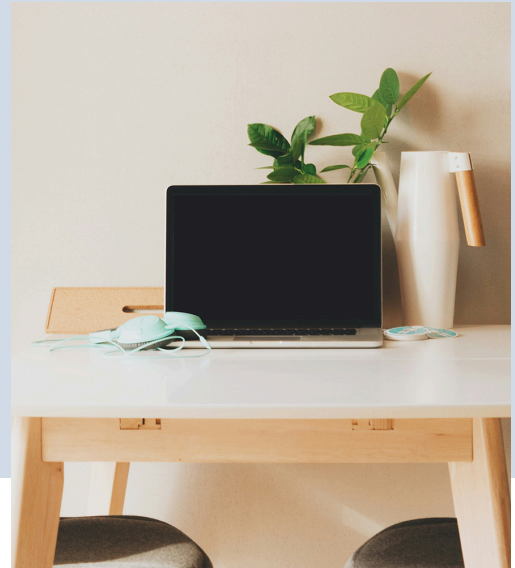




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What New Research Says About Responding to Employee Feedback

by
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Many leaders might assume that the best way to respond to employee feedback is to respond quickly with changes, but a recent research study reveals that such rapid shifts in leadership behaviors might actually backfire for managers.

“When it comes to perceptions of the change from your direct reports and followers, rapid changes without explanation or context might seem quite unbelievable and quite inauthentic,” says Danbee Chon, a professor of management at the University of South Florida Muma College of Business and lead author on the paper. The researchers examined changes leaders made to their behaviors, such as how they managed meetings, gave feedback, and motivated employees, noting that these changes often come in the wake of formalized upwards feedback opportunities, like 360-degree reviews.

Even though “leaders might subjectively feel authentic when they’re making these changes...the perceptions you might hold about yourself may not be the same as the perceptions that other people hold of you.”

We spoke to Chon about the findings of the research paper, as well as her recommendations for leaders on how to respond to feedback. Here are takeaways from our conversation:

What they found: The double-edged sword of change

In a series of studies, researchers found that workers tend to see rapid improvements as less authentic than gradual ones. Even though leaders were responding directly to reports’ feedback, respondents described the changes as more disingenuous and suspicious than even making no changes at all, whereas more gradual changes were seen as more genuine.

AT A GLANCE:

- Recent research reveals that too-rapid shifts in leaders’ actions can backfire for managers.
- In a series of studies, researchers found that workers tend to see rapid improvements as less authentic than gradual ones.
- “People tend to believe that authentic change takes both time and effort—that true transformation requires a shift in both mindset and behavior,” explains Danbee Chon, a professor of management at the University of South Florida Muma College of Business and lead author on the paper.

When workers see rapid changes, they're "looking for opportunities to explain why it happened," says Chon. "In the context of feedback, it gets explained as, 'You changed because of feedback and therefore it's less authentic to who you are.'"

One attenuating factor was the perceived difficulty of the change. When workers see behavior changes as more difficult, they are even more likely to see rapid improvements as phony. "When change appears easy...the authenticity penalty attenuates, so the gap in authenticity reduces," says Chon. Even more, leaders were also seen as more responsive when they enacted an easy change more rapidly, compared to more gradual adoption of easy change.

"People tend to believe that authentic change takes both time and effort—that true transformation requires a shift in both mindset and behavior," explains Chon. "Given this, when leaders change gradually, this change is more likely to align with what people expect genuine improvements to look like. When change is rapid, this is less likely to align, and people are more likely to look for alternative explanations to understand why this change happened."

Why it matters: The stakes of authenticity

"The biggest component is that people tend to believe that it's not easy to change," says Chon. "If you're doing the work of the difficult change, the last thing you would want is to see that these changes aren't quite projecting the same way that you intended."

Even more, she points out that prior research points to downstream effects of inauthenticity for trust, group effectiveness, and worker voice. "The more authentic leaders are seen, the more trust and effectiveness people also tend to ascribe to these leaders," says Chon. And when leaders are seen as less authentic, "it prevents people from wanting to speak up again in the future."

What to do instead: Create clarity around change

Leaders "face a delicate balance between being responsive and maintaining authenticity," says Chon, but that doesn't mean they should stop making changes in response to feedback or only make changes gradually.

Chon recommends "communicating the process and the effort in making these changes because it will help set expectations," she says. That means being clear about the feedback you received, why it's important for you to respond, and the process and effort involved in changing your behavior. The trick is to "communicate that you have thought about these changes independently as well, or that this does in fact reflect a change in your inner beliefs." One way to do that is by drawing clear connections between the planned change and your team's key goals or shared values.

For example, a leader who is consistently 10 minutes late to meetings might say, "I've received feedback that my lateness is impacting our ability to move forward during group meetings. I take that seriously because I know how important it is for us to hit our goals this quarter. In response, I'm committing to doing better by scheduling more downtime between meetings and finding more ways for us to move work forward asynchronously."

While communicating about changes creates an extra step for already busy managers, it gives leaders an opportunity to demonstrate both their responsiveness and their authenticity—while also modeling for workers the ability to learn and grow from feedback.

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