



Words for the Journey

February, 2012

A Monthly Email Publication of
The Chrysalis Group

"No matter what our attempts to inform, it is our ability to inspire that will turn the tides."
~Jan Phillips

A Language of Nourishment by Kathleen McSweeney, © 2012

Years ago when I entered the corporate world, one of my biggest surprises was the complex jerry rigging often created when a manager was not willing to provide honest feedback to an underperforming employee. Managers would cite reasons like the person was an old friend or the individual would be hurt. To manage around the employee, colleagues would be assigned additional responsibilities, department structures would become convoluted, and frustration would spread.

I became fascinated by the art and mechanics of providing fair, useful feedback. When teaching communication early in my career, I would ask participants to brainstorm what the word "feedback" evoked in them. Invariably, they responded with "negative," "bad news," "criticism." We would then discuss techniques of how to deliver feedback. We'd talk about the need to balance "constructive" with "positive." They'd hear about providing feedback near the time of the other's behavior. Some techniques provided steps in the right direction, but felt mechanistic to me. Others seemed helpful but not sufficient. Something significant was missing.

Then one afternoon, from my office in a glass, steel, and marble environment, I watched a colleague walk down a long hall into our manager's office. I felt for the young woman; I knew she was about to be fired. She had been told for months her work performance was not adequate and had been coached and counseled about how to improve her methods and results. The news would surely be difficult for her, though it wouldn't come as a complete surprise.

An hour later, the colleague walked out of our manager's office, eyes red from crying, with a quiet smile on her face. Puzzled, I hurried to the manager's office to ask what she could have said to inspire a smile under the daunting circumstances. "I talked to her about her strengths, her favored work style, her personality when she was thriving," the manager said. "Then we contrasted those with the position she's been holding," she explained.

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"At some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."
~Albert Schweitzer

Witnessing the balanced firing inspired me. It sounded like an extended gardening metaphor, in which the manager helped the employee see that perhaps she wasn't planted in the right soil. And it stopped me in my tracks.

I had worked for years to toughen up when providing and receiving critical feedback. In my own management roles, at times I had practiced a negative way, learned in my upbringing, of delivering feedback. Looking back, I think the "stars" I managed enjoyed my style, but an employee who was seriously not measuring up surely must have dreaded a feedback discussion.

My manager's modeling led me to consider offering feedback in ways that might nourish the other's spirit. I began years of studying how to practice what I began to think of as "feeding back."

I've learned that, to offer inspiring feedback, we must use more than techniques and a slight shift in attitude. The art of feeding back requires that we carefully consider our own role in the communication. This is not an easy task; it requires learning to communicate "bad news" in ways that respect the integrity of the receiver.

Through the Nonviolent Communication model developed by Marshall Rosenberg, I'm learning to pause and prepare for a discussion, to examine my assumptions, to identify my own and other's needs, and to listen more deeply. In the Appreciative Inquiry process, championed by David Cooperrider, I'm reminded to look first at what an individual is doing right and to help them build on their strengths.

Feeding back, these days for me, means encouraging others to enlarge their range of behaviors and skills, rather than merely focusing on their flaws. As we examine an individual's weaknesses, we can talk about how any strength extended will likely become a weakness. Together we can consider the realities and requirements of a particular assignment or role. We can discuss the larger context of culture, expectations, and what the individual needs to offer and receive in order to fulfill their role and begin to flourish.

When we view a person's skills on a continuum, from starting point to mastery, we hear less "I'm not creative," or "I'm not good with technology" and more "How can I develop?" Continuums remind us that seldom are we all good or all bad in behavior or even in work performance. Continuums can help us visualize opportunities to grow, spur us on in our development. I'm not yet at mastery in offering feedback, but I'm moving forward.

Parker Palmer writes: "A leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light onto some part of the world and onto the lives of the people who dwell there." Through your own experience, what have you learned about feeding back? How do you project light onto the lives of the people in your world?

Kathleen McSweeney is a leadership coach, photographer, and Chrysalis Group Council member. Kathleen is active in a writing group whose members offer each other inspiring feedback.