Feedback

It had been a very long day for Jim, including sales meetings, a lost account, and a troublesome meeting with his boss. It was long past being late and Jim just settled down into his nice, soft bed with a relaxing sigh. The day was melting away, and the thought of amour began to creep into his thoughts: a warm and pleasant thought. Jim turned to Sally and was startled by Sally looking directly into his face with a stare like that of a falcon locking onto a field mouse. "Do you know what Chris has done?" she hissed. "Raised the price of our charity luncheon by $30. Do you know how long we've been holding this function at the Club? I'll be the laughingstock of the charity…" Amour, not so much. However, as Director and House Chair, Jim was about to give GM Chris some feedback.

Directors and managers are bombarded with "feedback." From the all-important annual review, to the ladies in the card room telling the GM that "it's always too cold in here, don't you pay the heating bill?", to the fellow-member commenting to the president on the first tee: "Man, I hope the greens have gotten better, the other day they were slow and bumpy," to Jim and Sally.

According to the categorization of feedback types laid out by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen in their book *Thanks for the Feedback*, the conversation that Jim is about to have with Chris will normally take one of three forms: Appreciation (not going to happen here), Coaching (Chris will need to dig deep to find coaching in this particular exchange) or Evaluation (Bingo! This will be the crux of the conversation. Jim will bluntly evaluate Chris's decision-making and performance.)

As directors and managers, it will be difficult to influence the initial form of the feedback, but what we can influence is our own delivery or acceptance of that feedback. For Chris, this will be a challenge, because chances are good that Jim will be coming from a position of challengingly high emotions.

Unfortunately, a person's immediate response upon receiving feedback is often to match the emotions of the giver. Chris needs to be able to dissociate the emotion from the message, and this can be troublesome. When receiving feedback, according to Stone and Heen, Chris will immediately be hit with three emotionally jarring triggers: Truth, Relationship, and Identity.

The perceived correctness of the statement is assessed under the Truth Trigger. In this case, did Chris really raise the price of the event by $30? If there is any question about the truthfulness of

the statement, the receiver will tend to discount or disregard the giver's statement, and even become aggressive about its validity.

The relationship that Jim and Chris have will have a marked effect on Chris's perception of the feedback. If they are close and respectful, the feedback will be strike Chris as far more credible than if the relationship is either new or negative.

The most destructive of the three emotional triggers is the Identity Trigger. This pertains solely to the receiver. Where does the feedback place its receiver mentally? Negative feedback, such as what Jim is about to give Chris, will often throw the receiver into a tailspin of defense mechanisms, beginning with an immediate minor adrenaline jolt, all the way up to virtual emotional incapacitation. Our natural fight-or-flight mechanism kicks in, sometimes causing us to think of counter-attacks, or, in the most extreme cases, even to pass out.

Seeing Jim's name on the caller ID, Chris picks up the phone: "Good morning, Jim, I'm glad you called. How may I help you?"

"Are you @#$%ing kidding me? Sally tells me you raised the price of her event from $25 to $55. What are you thinking? This event has been a staple of our Club for decades. Sally's mother's mother was a founder of that charity and brought it to the Club while Great Granddad Cyrus was president. If you run this group off your job is in serious trouble."

Wow! Regardless of the facts, Chris has a natural shot of adrenaline that places Chris easily into the fight-or-flight response. Pretty much anything Jim said after his harsh-toned "Are you @#$%ing kidding me?" was lost until the phrase "... job is in serious trouble" reawakened Chris and fully engaged the Identity Trigger. Chris's relationship with Jim also contributed to Chris's emotional juggernauting; Jim was a solid Board Member, with a professional relationship with Chris, so the seriousness of the tone carried weight with Chris.

Thankfully, Truth will out! "Holy cow, Jim, slow down a minute here. Sally's event is very important to us. We realize all that they have done for this Club and the great community spirit that they bring for us all. We met with this year's chairpersons, and after some haggling we agreed to $30 total, not a $30 increase, just $30 total. A five dollar increase. I'm sorry that Sally was misinformed. Both of the co-chairs were very pleased with this agreement, and we look forward to another wonderful event."

There is a long pause on the other end of the line; sensing that the crow is cooking in the pan for Jim, Chris deftly moves the conversation to a different topic: "Jim, we have a House meeting coming up next week. I'd like to talk with you about the agenda. When will you have some time?" By asking a specific and simple question, Chris takes charge of the direction, prompting Jim to re-frame the conversation. This tactic allows Jim to close the conversation on reasonable terms. Regardless of whether Jim chooses to make any further reference to his initial onslaught of

aggression towards Chris, the way that Chris handled the situation will heighten credibility with Jim, and, hopefully, improve their future conversations.

When dealing with feedback, either as a giver or a receiver, remember the three forms: appreciation, coaching, and evaluating. You should be conscious of how these forms will trigger the receiver, or yourself. Recognize that people react distinctively, but in fundamentally similar ways, to the three triggers: truth, relationship, and identity. This awareness will help you ensure that your feedback is interpreted in its intended light. Always take a breath before giving feedback: think about the purpose of the feedback and the potential trigger that will be engaged.