

## Management and Performance Associates – May 2015

### “I don’t need your feedback. I’m perfect”

Today, almost 40 years after her death, Maria Callas is considered one of the most renowned and influential opera singers of the 20th century, yet she didn’t have a single performance at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York at which she was not booed.

Before receiving a Nobel Prize in literature, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was poorly reviewed by quite a few book critics, including Harold Bloom of Yale, who remarked that "*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is a kind of aesthetic battle fatigue, since every page is rammed full of life beyond the capacity of any single reader to absorb."

Pauline Kael, the famous New Yorker film critic from 1968 to 1991 hated almost everything by Fellini and Hitchcock, and once described "The Sound of Music" as "the single most repressive influence on artistic freedom in movies".

Of course the situation we describe above is not limited to the arts. Our view is that it’s not realistic to expect to receive only compliments for a performance—any performance. It doesn’t matter if at the office, Covent Garden or Broadway. Every performance is subject to opposing reviews. If all the masterpieces and geniuses mentioned above have received negative reviews, how is it possible that your staff members are perfect? How is it possible that “normal people” (as well as some artists) are not prepared to receive negative feedback?

Let’s explore some of the causes and ways to overcome them:

#### Cultural reasons

Many cultures have an orientation for indirect communication, and being assertive is considered “rude”. Please bear in mind that culture is not limited to geographic borders. It could also relate to corporate culture, or even generational. Regardless of your employee being from Latin America (Romance languages are much more indirect than

English) or being a stereotypical millennial (craving recognition for any performance) the challenge is to provide honest feedback so they know where they stand, and therefore are able to further develop.

#### Distorted self image

A very tiny percentage of people in this group are clinical cases and need to seek professional help (please see our June 2011 issue about being delusional – “Mr. De Mille, I’m ready for my close up”). The majority of people either lack maturity or have a history of receiving not so candid feedback (including minimization of issues). Until the person sees reality, there are no chances for awareness and subsequent change.

#### Lack of acceptance due to credibility

It is going to be harder for the message to get through if the feedback recipient is biased against the feedback provider. Needless to say feedback receivers are missing a great opportunity to reduce their blind spots.

#### Past history with poor feedback

When managers provide poor feedback they generate a defensive reaction, which, if not managed, becomes a barrier for the recipient to become aware of the issue and work on it. Poor feedback includes judgment, opinions, advice, generalizations, etc.

#### Three “simple” ways to help your direct reports overcome these barriers

##### 1) Provide fact based feedback

A sure way to make staff members see reality is to stick to specific and verifiable facts. They may not like hearing what you are saying, but it will be hard to deny the situation. There is a difference between “your sales are 37% below the agreed target” and “your numbers are awful.”

##### 2) Discuss observed behaviors

Say things like “I have noticed that you arrived at 9:27 for your 9 am meeting with your most

important client's CFO." Please remember that "I was told" is not feedback. Talking about facts is critical when referring to numeric goals. Observed behaviors are critical when referring to competencies.

**3) Use a constructive and empathetic tone**

Staff members need to understand that the "talk" is about helping them. Feedback is only information to generate awareness, and needs to be followed by a coaching conversation where they are involved in analyzing causes, generating alternatives and committing to a solution.

Finally, please remember that this is not an exact science, and there is no guarantee that your employees will see the light after a 5 minute conversation. Make it a process. It is important to monitor and to provide additional feedback on observed changes.

**See you next time. We welcome your feedback.**

To know more of our training programs,  
please send us an e-mail to:

[sergio.pereira@mapa-way.com](mailto:sergio.pereira@mapa-way.com) or

[sonia.dondice@mapa-way.com](mailto:sonia.dondice@mapa-way.com)

Visit our website:

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