MGM Resorts Executive Touts 3 Life-Changing Ways to Use Feedback

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We've all encountered organizations that are going through a lot of change. I recently worked with an organization going through a transitional phase--they had a new division and even that division had gone through a major overhaul so they could be higher functioning within the whole of the company. All of that change can be hard on a team.

Fast-forward a year later, I talked to one of the senior leaders on the team and found out that things had dramatically improved. The team was functioning productively, communicating with each other, making positive changes, and they were really on the right track.

I interviewed the Senior Vice President at MGM Resorts, Kelly Litster, to find out the strategy they used to make the difference. She said one word that stood out to me: feedback.

These are the three things Litster's team learned about feedback:

We learned how to give feedback. One important step this team took to improve its performance was to create a sort of social contract. They agreed to a number of behaviors they wanted to hold themselves accountable for. The team started practicing a "scoring" technique to track how well they practiced the behaviors individually, and learned how to give feedback to explain their scores for each other.

Teams like Litster's often include a number of common elements in their "operating agreements." Some items might include avoiding blame, looking for the root cause of a problem, communicating messages even when they're hard to say, and receiving messages without defensiveness even when they're hard to hear.

Litster's team held themselves accountable to scoring each other on those behaviors--a technique that made it possible for each of them to see how they score numerically, quantifying their behavior. Each individual team member can see the items they need to work on, try to remedy it and watch their score go up. It allows them to keep track of how they're doing and provides a vehicle for how to communicate those messages and transform their culture.

We learned how to take feedback. Litster observed that on her team, members grew in their ability to listen and open their minds to feedback, learning how to do things differently instead of being closed off.

"We had to build trust," Litster said, "The contract (or promise to behave a certain way) started us off--we joked about it before we could live by it. Then we had some serious trust building to do. Once there was a tiny bit of trust and someone was vulnerable--the team started to come together."

They say a breaking point either leads to a breakdown or a breakthrough. In Litster's case, it led to a breakthrough. They made it safe to give feedback within their team culture, so important messages could be both delivered and received. Taking hard feedback may not always been easy for a team member. It may not be pleasant. But it *is* helpful, and essential to elevate the team.

We learned how to use feedback to make improvements. Litster noticed that her team learned to assert themselves, to be necessary for the service of the greater goal even if the feedback made them uncomfortable initially, and they learned how to help each other. They also learned how to ask for help. Then they tracked their results and watched as the whole team came together in a more effective way. They also became open about giving compliments and offering help. The whole atmosphere became more congenial and productive. Perhaps most importantly, they were able to start demonstrating that they genuinely cared about one another and helped each other succeed.

If you lead a team, consider how you can use these same strategies for transforming the culture in an equally positive way.

- Is your team comfortable giving and receiving feedback?
  Do you have a system for communicating what's important and how people are performing?

- Do you have an agreement about how to improve based on the feedback?

With these three practices on using feedback that were so successful on Litster's team at MGM Resorts, you can tackle a changing corporate landscape productively, and you'll learn a lot about yourself and your colleagues along the way.

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