

**CORNER OFFICE**

# *Conquering Your Fears of Giving Feedback*

---

**By Adam Bryant**

Dec. 29, 2012

*This interview with **Karen May**, vice president for people development at Google, was conducted and condensed by **Adam Bryant**.*

**Q.** *You consulted for many companies before you joined Google full time. What are some common mistakes you've noticed in training programs for employees?*

**A.** One thing that doesn't make sense is to require a lot of training. People learn best when they're motivated to learn. If people opt in, versus being required to go, you're more likely to have better outcomes.

You can also influence people to come to training. If a group of people go through some kind of program and they like it, then you ask them to nominate someone who might find the program beneficial. If the invitation comes from a colleague or a manager, you have that kind of peer-to-peer influence that says: "I got something out of this. You might, too." Then the people who come are motivated. They assume they're going to get something out of it. You just create a much different vibe than, "I was told I have to show up to this thing."

Another "don't" would be thinking that because some training content is interesting, everyone should therefore go through it. If something is interesting under particular conditions, it can lose its magic when applied to everyone.

---

**Daily business updates** The latest coverage of business, markets and the economy, sent by email each weekday. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

---

**Q.** *Other pitfalls?*

**A.** Don't use training to fix performance problems. If you've got a performance problem, there is a process to go through to figure out what's causing it. Maybe the person doesn't have the knowledge or skill or capability. Or is it motivation, or something about relationships within the work environment? Or lack of clarity about expectations? Training is the right solution only if the person doesn't have the capability. But what I have seen in other places is sort of a knee-jerk reaction by managers to put someone in a training class if somebody isn't performing well.

**Q.** *Many C.E.O.'s I've interviewed talk about how hard it is for people to give direct feedback. Have you seen that, too?*

**A.** Absolutely. I would say it happens for a couple of reasons. It's simply harder to give difficult feedback than positive feedback or no feedback. It's harder because it can be an uncomfortable conversation. It creates tension. You might be disappointing somebody or potentially leading them to feel worse about themselves.



Karen May says that earlier in her career, she learned to realize “that one of the most valuable things I could do for somebody is tell them exactly what nobody else had told them before.”

Earl Wilson/The New York Times

If you've identified something that isn't going well, then you're likely to be asked, “How do I fix it?” If you don't know the answer, you might not want to start the conversation. I think that's the primary reason managers don't give feedback. They're willing to give the feedback, but then they won't know how to help fix it, so why start the conversation?

As a coach, I was often in the position of giving people feedback they hadn't heard before, after I interviewed a bunch of people they work with. It was always difficult for me, too. Just at a human level, it's difficult to tell somebody that something that isn't working about them. But I came to find that people are incredibly grateful. If I'm not doing well and I don't know it or I don't know why or I can't put my finger on what's not working and no one will tell me, I won't be able to fix it.

### **Business & Economy: Latest Updates** ›

Updated 3 hours ago

- [Microsoft profit soars 48%, to \\$20.5 billion.](#)
- [Google's profit and revenue soared in the third quarter.](#)
- [Twitter's revenue rises 37 percent in the third quarter.](#)

And if you give me the information, the moment that the information is being transferred is painful, but then I have the opportunity to change it. I've come to realize that one of the most valuable things I could do for somebody is tell them exactly what nobody else had told them before.

**Q.** *How often does that have a positive outcome?*

**A.** People can do something with the feedback probably 70 percent of the time. And for the other 30 percent, they are either not willing to take it in, it doesn't fit their self-image, they're too resistant, in denial, or they don't have the wherewithal to change it. And the reality is that most change happens in small increments. So if you're watching to see if someone's changing, you have to watch for the incremental change. It's not a straight line.

**Q.** *Other insights about giving feedback?*

**A.** We do something in some learning programs with our leaders where we'll put them in a fast-paced exercise and ask them to give feedback to each other, spur of the moment, based on the experience they've had together during the day that they've been together. I actually named it "speed-back" instead of "feedback."

We have people sit in chairs and they're knee to knee. Then we start the speed-back and say, "You have three minutes to answer the question, 'How have you experienced me during this learning program?'" Then the bell rings and the person giving feedback hears how the other perceived them. Many people say it's some of the best feedback they'd ever received. We've experimented with different questions, like, "What advice would you give me based on the experience that you've had with me here?"

**Q.** *You were an executive coach for many years. How many executives have you worked with one-on-one?*

**A.** I'd say more than 300.

**Q.** *Any broad patterns you've noticed?*

**A.** A common pattern I've heard is, "I'm doing what I've always done, and it used to work really well for me, but it's not working anymore." Often it happens when people get new responsibilities, and they approach their new role the same way they've been working, and rewarded, for years. Yet the new circumstances require a different set of behaviors.

People are often promoted because they're great at something, and that has helped them move into broader roles and responsibilities. But they haven't necessarily learned all the skills they need to be effective in a broader role. So where I ended up helping people often was in relationships with others, and understanding the impact they have on the people around them, cultivating some empathy, learning to listen, learning to give other people the spotlight, learning to work collaboratively. It wasn't usually from a lack of willingness to do those things, but they didn't have a strong muscle.

So you teach people capabilities around being effective with other people in the interest of getting something done. New clients might say, "I don't want to just be nice." But listening and empathy are actually effective strategies for influencing people and getting things done. You have to build the skill and do it because you see the value of it.