

Executive Challenge #10:

“At my level, I rarely get honest feedback, so how do I know what I need to improve?”

What are the biggest challenges facing successful business people today? In my work as a certified executive coach for C-Suite Executives, Directors, Managers, and Entrepreneurs, there are many recurring themes that seem to surface. One at a time, I'll be sharing with you 12 of those top challenges along with hints, tips, and steps you can take to avoid or eliminate altogether these key issues that might be holding you back from achieving the kind of success you are aiming for.

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Many years ago, a mentor of mine told me something very profound. I asked him what it was that kept certain managers moving up the corporate ladder while others stopped. What he said has never left me. He told me that those leaders who did not progress to the top *stopped being coachable*. A mindset that cripples some senior executives is the belief that they have made it to the top and are somehow beyond the need for feedback. They no longer feel that they have anything to learn, so they remain in a static place without growth. As a result, their careers also cease to grow.

Senior people who continue to be at the top of their game recognize that there is always room for growth, so they ask for feedback regularly. If no one is offering you feedback because of your heightened position, or if you don't feel you're getting honest feedback from subordinates, it's your responsibility to go after it. There is no better way to accelerate both your career and your company. Here are some tips:

- In a one-on-one environment, ask for feedback from your subordinates, your boss, and key colleagues. (If you try to have a group meeting for feedback, no one will be honest with you, rendering the meeting worthless.)
- Let each individual know that you are sincere in your request and that you want candor.
- Listen intently, and write down what you hear.
- Bite your tongue! Don't allow yourself to become defensive, no matter what is said. If you do, the exercise will backfire, and chances are you'll never receive honest feedback again.
- When they are finished, simply say, “Thank you.” *Say nothing more than that.*

If you feel that your subordinates or others will simply be too uncomfortable to give you honest feedback, an alternative is to create an anonymous questionnaire for each to complete, or you can enlist the help of a coach who can get the feedback for you.

After you have gathered all of the feedback, look for the common elements and themes. These are the key behaviors that you want to focus on improving. Then, create an action plan to begin changing the behaviors that need work. Find a coach if you feel at a loss as to how to put the feedback into action or if you feel you need extra motivation to change some on-the-job behaviors and non-productive habits.

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Work on these changes every day, but don't expect success immediately. Long-lasting change in behavior requires time and persistence. Most of the behaviors you will want to change have been long-time habits, so you first need to become aware of when and how the behavior takes place. Then, you will be in a position to stop yourself and do something different.

After 60 days of working on your targeted improvements, hold individual feedback meetings with your team members again. Ask them the same questions as before, along with whether and how well you have improved.

Even if the feedback stings in the beginning, you will eventually find that it's exciting to improve. When you succeed in changing an ingrained behavior, you feel a strong sense of accomplishment. Additionally, the respect you receive from your team as a result of listening to their feedback is invaluable. They will feel empowered by the fact that you took their comments to heart, and you will become a great role model for how they can use feedback to improve themselves, too.

Page 2: Challenge #10: "At my level, I rarely get honest feedback, so how do I know what I need to improve?"

Brenda S. Bence is an internationally-recognized branding expert, Certified Executive Coach, dynamic trainer and Certified Speaking Professional, and the author of several award-winning books, including the *How YOU™ Are Like Shampoo* personal branding series and *Smarter Branding Without Breaking the Bank*.

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Now, as President of Brand Development Associates (BDA) International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, corporate and personal brand development. Brenda's client list includes companies such as Citibank, Microsoft, Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse, Deloitte, Hershey's, KFC, Kraft, Johnson & Johnson, Mattel, and Sheraton Hotels.

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