



## OBJECTIVITY: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR GROWTH

Now that you are the president, or one of the key principals running your company, you need to be aware of the power of objectivity. The more senior you are in an organization, the less honest, the less frequent is the feedback you get on your own performance. Unless you are self satisfied, unless everything is going well with your company and you are meeting all your business goals, you need to have some resources in your professional life that challenge your view of yourself, your behavior, your interpretation of “facts”. And even if you are achieving all your goals, beware complacency. If you are not growing, changing, maturing, or goaded in ways that are helping you develop, you are at best standing still and at worse, failing to keep pace with rising standards of excellence.

As an entrepreneur or manager, you must shift gears frequently during the course of a day. The continuum of topics that requires your attention is wide and diverse. Issues facing you are often ones without clear answers, leaving you with a high level of ambiguity, a mental place in which many people are uncomfortable.

Another element of the senior role is the demand to be all things to all people, which is enormously draining. Employees and others expect you to be a leader at all times.... sure, confident, knowing, optimistic, decisive and unflappable.

So, where do you turn for an objective assessment or “sanity check”? What is objectivity anyway, and why is it important? One good definition of objectivity is *something uninfluenced by emotions or personal prejudices. It is based on observable phenomena and presented factually.* An objective assessment is free from favoritism, self-interest, or bias in judgment. Such data is fair, just, equitable, impartial and dispassionate. Putting so many qualifiers on this type of feedback underscores why objective information is so difficult to get, and why it is so valuable, and essential to find.

Objectivity can provide new information and often leads to fresh insights or solutions. Real feedback helps us operate at our best. It strips away the illusions and delusions that we often have about ourselves and our impact on people and things.

But, objectivity for business owners or senior management typically is not readily available. There are many reasons why.

- Most people don't know how to speak honestly and tactfully. They haven't been taught how to do so. They haven't had models to emulate. Further, they don't have the skills to assess specifically, and communicate clearly, what you are doing, or not doing, so you have a clear picture of where you stand and how you could operate differently.
- At senior levels, performance discussions (if they are done at all) become rote. They are often carbon copies of last year's appraisal.
- Most colleagues are too close to you; some may have grown up with you. It is a real art to be both a friend and an objective resource. This is a skill set few possess.
- Now that you are the boss no one wants to offend you. So, no one comes forth

- with useful, candid information.
- Employees are afraid and self-protection is apparent.
- Sometimes unhealthy competition is evident and peers may actually want you to fail.
- People believe that their pay adjustments, bonuses, or even their employment depends on keeping you happy. So, they fear antagonizing you.

You say, *Okay, okay, I know I need objective advice some times, but where do I get it?* The following resources and practices should give you some ideas of where to turn.

- Your company may have an **insider/outsider** who is up to the challenge. An insider/outsider is an employee who has worked for other firms, preferably in another industry. The key is that they have other experiences to share that are beyond your own, and a maturity to assess your actions and communicate useful observations. The best candidates are individuals with a level of self-confidence that doesn't revolve around your approval. These are *not yes people!*
- You deal with **outside professionals** that may fit your needs. If they have enough knowledge of your company and a good sense of your style, financial advisors, attorneys or management consultants may have the talent to offer you more than their technical skills or business acumen. Some might become mentors.
- Many companies have a **Board of Directors** primarily comprised of employees. Not terribly useful for objectivity! If you have carefully chosen outside directors, and enough of them, there is the opportunity for quality input to your search for growth. But, you must make the effort to seek out one or more of these business leaders for their ideas, opinions, and observations.
- Some companies have **advisory boards** that are entirely external professionals. They tend to impose a real discipline on your compilation and presentation of company information. Often, because they are paid only a stipend, their real commitment is to you and your success. So their feedback is caring, growth producing and targeted. Again, if they have the correct skill set, advisory board members can offer important objectivity.
- Having a quality **performance appraisal** process is a good tool for personal and professional growth. One possible approach is to have each of the senior managers complete a balanced and honest review of the other managers. These evaluations are sent to a consultant who compiles the information and facilitates a conversation among the senior group. They discuss specifically: what works, what needs to be improved, and what gets in the way of teamwork. This is all in the context of how each assessment affects company performance and individual growth.
- If your quest is for truth, one valuable practice you can institute and reinforce is an organization-wide acceptance of **constructive confrontation**. To have such a company there cannot be reprisals if people offer honest criticism. Employees should never be cut off at the knees for daring to disagree or appropriately speak out on a matter. Rather, they must be encouraged to be problem identifiers *and* problem solvers.

- **Business partners** can be a source of important communication and insight, an outcome of which can be synergy in the workplace.
- **Colleagues and business friends** from other companies or outside your industry can be enormously useful as objective yardsticks. They can provide specifics on actions they or others have taken in similar situations as you are facing. Also, they can be a valuable sounding board for new ideas, getting suggestions, and providing general support when you are feeling depleted and overwhelmed.
- Many **technical and professional associations** sponsor business roundtable discussions that allow you to listen in, and participate on topics of interest to you and your company. While not as useful as targeted conversations with people who know you, they still provide a measure of new information and techniques. Anything that adds to your personal knowledge is worthwhile.
- An increasing number of business leaders are turning to **executive coaches** for professional growth. Such arrangements, when they occur between qualified consultants and motivated executives, provide private, individualized learning and help achieve positive business results. The executive coach must have solid business credentials, in addition to strong consulting skills around individual development. Their role is similar to a personal trainer. That is, the executive coach assesses how you are performing, listens to your goals and needs, and challenges you to reach them through a plan of progressive improvement.

In summary, be sure that you are not so caught up in the day-to-day business issues that you forget about your own growth and performance. Review your options for quality feedback. Remember that no one person, or resource is experienced or expert at everything. Not everyone has the same capacity for observation and effective communication, so have a few confidants. It is important as a business leader to step outside yourself.

Use objectivity as an important tool. It will greatly enhance your personal growth and as **the** key person, you set the tone for your company, inside and outside. Objectivity can help you achieve the level of excellence you desire.

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