SEPTEMBER 2011
McKinsey Quarterly

Top executives need feedback—here's how they can get it

Robert S. Kaplan

As executives become more senior, they are less likely to receive constructive performance and strategic feedback. They can get it by calling on their junior colleagues.

The problem

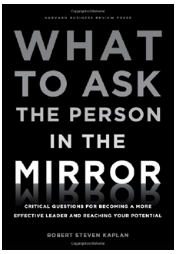
Subordinates don't want to offend the boss. Therefore, as you become more senior in an organization, you tend to get less feedback. Over time, you risk growing confused about your development needs and becoming isolated from criticism.

Why it matters

Your junior colleagues represent an untapped source of feedback that can help you materially improve your performance. They can also provide valuable input on key strategic decisions.

What to do about it

Start by cultivating a network of junior coaches who are willing to tell you the things you don't want to hear. Then, push feedback further by empowering them to look at your business with a "clean sheet of paper.



Elements of this article were adapted from Robert S. Kaplan's *What to Ask the Person in the Mirror: Critical Questions for Becoming a More Effective Leader and Reaching Your Potential* (Harvard Business School Press, August 2011).

By the time you become a senior executive, you have no doubt honed a set of skills and talents that enable you to be effective in your job. To help you get to this point, you likely had coaches and mentors who closely monitored your progress, prodded you to develop your talents, and, when necessary, confronted you with criticisms that you may not have wanted to hear but needed to hear in order to continue your upward path.

At this stage in your career, most (if not all) of your colleagues are probably subordinates. While you may be "overseen" by a board of directors or very senior boss, your superiors probably no longer closely observe your daily behavior. Instead, they now form their opinions of you based on your presentations in relatively formal settings or on secondhand reports from your subordinates.

As a result of this, many executives find that as they become more senior, they receive less coaching and become more confused about their performance and developmental needs. They may also become increasingly isolated from constructive criticism—subordinates do not want to offend the boss and may believe that constructive suggestions are unwelcome and unwise. Many senior executives also unwittingly send off a "vibe" that while they claim to encourage constructive criticism, they really don't want to hear it. At this stage of their careers, they may not have focused sufficiently on developing mutually trusting subordinate relationships that would make getting feedback and advice a lot easier.

Too frequently, when these executives ultimately do receive feedback in their year-end reviews (often as part of a 360-degree-feedback program), they are surprised to be confronted with specific criticisms of their leadership style, communication approach, and interpersonal skills. Worse, they may also hear broad concerns raised about their strategy, key tactical decisions, and operating priorities for the business. These leaders may even learn, often too late, that the various criticisms and concerns have been widely discussed among their subordinates for an extended period of time without them being aware.

I have certainly experienced and observed this phenomenon over the past 25 years in my own executive career and also in working with numerous executives since coming to Harvard Business School. I have seen the tendency for senior executives to become more isolated from constructive criticism and strategic advice—sometimes without their full awareness. As a result, over the past several years, I have worked intensively with my own direct reports and advised many other senior executives to develop specific approaches for getting the essential feedback they need.

The purpose of this article is to distill these approaches into specific and actionable advice. In doing so, I hope to make you more aware of the tendency to become isolated and suggest approaches to getting better feedback, particularly from subordinates, that will help you to materially improve your performance. I will also discuss further steps you can take to get dramatically better strategic advice regarding your business or nonprofit organization. By taking these actions, you should be able to take greater ownership of the feedback process and improve your ability to build your organization, capabilities, and career.

Cultivate a network of junior coaches

One of the first questions I ask senior executives is, "Who is your coach?" Many respond with a list of mentors who are outside the company or perhaps on the board of directors. These are "mentors" (versus coaches) because they do not directly observe the executive. Unfortunately, their advice is only as good as the narrative provided and often doesn't adjust for blind spots or the mentor's lack of professional familiarity with the executive.

My follow-up question—"Who actually observes your behavior on a regular basis and will tell you things you don't want to hear?"—is often met with silence.

This was the case with the CEO of a medium-sized pharmaceutical company. He complained of having a difficult time getting consensus among his senior-leadership team on several key strategic decisions. These included which early-stage drug compounds to develop and whether to develop them through joint ventures or by going it alone. Such decisions were enormously consequential due to the substantial capital required to develop and get FDA approval for a new drug. The CEO believed these issues required a high level of consensus, as they had an impact on every department of the company. He thought highly of his senior-leadership team but was becoming quite frustrated. He asked whether there might be a problem with his leadership style or, alternatively, if he should consider replacing one or more of his senior executives. Some of his close friends and outside advisers had suggested that a senior-team shake-up might help the situation.

I asked him whether he sought coaching from his subordinates. He responded, "Of course not; they're the subordinates—it would be awkward for me to ask them for coaching. I'm the coach!" When I asked him what was wrong with seeking coaching from subordinates, he thought long and hard and explained that, during his career, he seldom had observed his bosses and senior-executive role models make themselves vulnerable enough to seek feedback from their direct reports. He also wasn't sure how he would do it and believed that this would make his subordinates (and him) uncomfortable and possibly disturb the boss/subordinate hierarchy.

Despite his reluctance, I urged him to go out and individually "interview" at least five of his direct reports. He need ask only one question: "What advice would you offer to help me improve my effectiveness? Please give me one or two specific and actionable suggestions. I would appreciate your advice." Although hesitant, he agreed to try it.

These conversations were awkward at first. The first responses indicated that he was doing "fine" or even "very well." It took time, prodding, and waiting out some uncomfortable silences to convince his subordinates that he was sincere, truly wanted feedback, and was serious about acting on it. In the course of this initial round of conversations, the CEO received some surprising, jarring, but very useful advice. He learned that:

- He was perceived as someone who seldom asked questions of subordinates. Some of his direct reports admitted that they had assumed he didn't care what they thought.

- He was widely seen as a poor listener. When subordinates came to speak with him, he usually did most of the talking.

- He was viewed as quite "guarded"—not revealing much about what he believed were the key issues facing the business and what worried him. People commented that they weren't sure how to read him and "didn't know where he was coming from." He realized that his subordinates often misinterpreted his actions.

- Lastly, his leadership meetings were procedural and reporting meetings rather than sessions in which issues were framed and debated. As a result, his senior leaders seldom had the opportunity to debate and discuss issues with each other (unless they initiated meetings on their own). This made it difficult for the group to agree on which drugs to develop or to decide how best to develop them.

While the CEO was widely perceived as a brilliant strategist and creative thinker, he was not yet seen as an effective manager and leader. Much of this was surprising to the executive, who said he hadn't previously heard these observations from any of his mentors or bosses.

He began to act immediately on a number of the criticisms. In particular, he arranged to reach out to each of his direct reports on a regular basis for specific advice (and encouraged them to do the same with their direct reports). He also established monthly leadership team dinners where the senior-executive group could candidly discuss and debate key issues.

After three months, the CEO was able to break the group stalemate on several important issues, including getting agreement on two new drug targets and specific approaches to developing each drug. During this time, the CEO had led several sessions where the members of the group wrestled with these tough questions and, importantly, came to better understand each other, as well as the CEO's vision for the business. Through open debate and discussion, the team members developed a greater respect for the challenges that each of them faced in their individual areas of responsibility. As a result, they began operating as a more cohesive unit.

In the course of these steps, the CEO also focused diligently on strengthening his own "soft" relationship-building skills, including self-

Employees at various levels become more motivated to give upward feedback when they see that it has a direct and positive influence on both senior-leader behavior and company actions.

disclosure, inquiry, and listening. He had long believed that a strong leader needed to be a bit guarded and a strong advocate. Now, he realized, it was time for him to revise this view and recognize that an outstanding leader is willing to reveal information about his or her values, background, and thoughts—as well as to ask good questions and be a skilled listener. While advocacy had its place, the CEO observed that his team responded much more constructively when he explained his own uncertainties and concerns, asked well-framed questions for debate, and actively listened to the discussion. He learned that these "soft" approaches were critical to getting better feedback and becoming a better manager.

He put these skills to use at his senior-team dinners, where he played the role of facilitator—framing two or three issues, forcing himself to sit quietly and actively listen, ask probing follow-up questions as appropriate, and generally ensure that team members expressed their candid views. This took considerable practice, but the CEO ultimately became a very effective discussion leader of the group.

In individual meetings, he worked hard to ask more questions, listen more (talk less), and disclose more about what was keeping him up at night. For example, he revealed his growing concerns about the high cost and uncertainty of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) drug approval process. By framing questions about how the company could avoid "betting the ranch" in developing individual drugs, the CEO helped his team better understand why he had been pushing the concept of joint venturing and ultimately crafted a consensus on the need for this approach on at least one of the company's new drug-development projects.

Above all, this CEO learned that asking for advice and coaching was a sign of strength rather than weakness. Using these techniques, he now found that he could rely more heavily on his subordinates for advice and as an early-warning system for his own performance. Furthermore, as he and his senior managers began to understand and trust one another, many shared with him their own career aspirations and concerns. Indeed, this had the impact of stabilizing his senior-leadership group, helping the CEO retain members of the team and generally improving morale. As a result of all these efforts, he now reported feeling far less alone and isolated. While he regretted not having taken this approach sooner, he was optimistic that he was now on the right track.

Push feedback further: The 'clean sheet of paper' exercise

As CEOs and other senior leaders strengthen their networks of junior coaches and build better relationships with subordinates, a broader culture of coaching and learning can take root in an organization. Employees at various levels become more motivated to give upward feedback when they see that it has a direct and positive influence on both senior-leader behavior and company actions.

Building on this progress, CEOs can take further steps to getting valuable input on key strategic questions. This is essential in a constantly changing world where industries and customers evolve and businesses can easily get out of alignment. In many cases, external shifts may be difficult for senior leadership to recognize, and otherwise vocal employees at the "point of attack" may not feel sufficiently informed or empowered to voice their views. In addition, existing strategic-planning and business review processes may not surface and confront these issues in a sufficiently timely and effective fashion.

Consider the experience of the CEO of an industrial-products company who was worried about the potential erosion of his company's competitive position. This CEO was widely respected in his company and industry and had done an excellent job of developing strong upward coaching relationships with subordinates.

The company had been built around a group of high-value-added products and several follow-on innovations, and had built very strong customer relationships over many years. However, the CEO was growing increasingly concerned that key competitors had taken specific actions that would strengthen their value propositions to his customers. He was also concerned about the commoditization of some of his company's legacy products. He believed that dramatic changes might be needed to meet these threats but feared that potential remedies—shutting down product lines, selling businesses, and restructuring how sales and product development interacted to serve customers—might damage the organization's culture and morale.

Four ways to get started

1 Cultivate junior coaches

Write down a realistic assessment of your specific strengths and weaknesses. List five subordinates who could give you specific feedback—particularly about your weaknesses.

Meet with each person individually and explain that you need his or her advice. Ask each to identify at least one or two specific tasks or skills they believe you could improve upon. Ask follow-up questions. Afterward, thank them for their help.

Encourage your direct reports to do this same exercise with their direct reports.

2 Practice self-disclosure

Write down one or two fundamental facts about yourself that would, if disclosed, help subordinates understand you better. This might include a bit about your personal story, upbringing, likes, passions, pet peeves, aspirations, or worries. Find opportunities to share this information.

This CEO's concerns raised questions that went beyond typical coaching. Further, he believed that the issues were too substantial and even controversial to be adequately handled by the company's regular strategic-review discussions and processes. Because his leadership team was closely knit, he sensed that senior leaders were walking on eggshells when they debated these issues—they were hesitant to be perceived as criticizing colleagues or unintentionally offending the CEO. He admitted that his senior team might be "too close" to the issues

3

Improve your ability to frame and discuss key questions

Identify a handful of key questions that your team should debate and discuss.

Make a habit of writing down one or two such questions before leading team meetings and engaging in one-on-one discussions.

When facilitating group discussions, take care to frame key questions, actively listen to the responses, and foster debate.

Immediately afterward, write down what you learned and identify appropriate next steps.

4

Assess your business with a 'clean sheet of paper'

Select a small team comprising your next generation of leaders. Ask them to examine a specific issue or assess your enterprise as if they could start from scratch.

Select team members based on your company's succession plan—including potential successors for your own job as well as for your direct reports.

Frame the issues and ground rules for this group up-front, and make sure it is allowed to operate independently (without your influence) until it reports its findings.

Encourage subordinates to try this exercise in their own areas of responsibility.

to recognize and propose appropriate actions. He even wondered whether it was too emotionally difficult for them to face what needed to be done.

The CEO decided to take an unorthodox step. He created a task force of six senior and midlevel up-and-coming executives and challenged them to look at the business with a clean sheet of paper, asking: "If you had to start this enterprise from scratch today, are these the markets we would serve? Are these the products we would offer? Are these the people we would hire? Is this the way we would organize, pay, and promote our people? What changes do we need to make, given our distinctive competencies and strategic aspirations?" He gave them six weeks to complete the assignment (in addition to their day jobs) and impressed upon them that there should be no "sacred cows" and that they should not worry about being "politically correct" in their findings. He also explained that, while he might not adopt all of their proposals, he wanted to hear each of their recommendations and ideas.

Six weeks later, the team came back with several bold recommendations. The team suggested divestiture of two aging product lines that, up until then, had been considered off-limits by the senior leadership because they had once been run by the CEO and were seen as part of his legacy. They also suggested a number of organizational changes, including building out the sales and customer service functions, developing (or acquiring) an upgraded emerging-market distribution capability, and realigning the company's compensation incentives.

The CEO was astounded by the audacity of the advice—and surprised that he completely agreed with it. He realized that he might have been too close to the business to recognize what needed to be done and felt liberated to get these specific proposals. As a next step, the CEO had the task force present its findings to his senior-leadership team, which agreed unanimously with the recommendations and immediately began working on plans to implement them.

One year later, the CEO reported that the changes were difficult but had substantially strengthened the company. He felt much more confident about the company's future and the strength of his leadership team. Further, he decided to launch a strategically focused "clean-sheet-of-paper" task force every one to two years to complement the company's regular strategic processes. He and his leadership team believed this new approach would allow them to create a fresh intervention capability that wasn't subject to the potential inertia and political pressures of the regular strategic processes. Further, this exercise created an opportunity to challenge up-and-coming executives and see them in action, while providing participants with a highly motivating learning experience.

This approach builds on efforts to create an upward coaching environment for senior leaders. It allows you to get coaching that is grounded in the strategic needs of the business and is also an excellent way to take a fresh look at your company. It reinforces the need for leaders to have the courage to frame the right questions and ask for help from their people. This type of approach, combined with strong individual coaching processes, can help build a powerful competitive advantage for your organization.

• • •

The approaches in this article are intended to help you take greater ownership of getting feedback and should complement the 360-degree feedback process or board review processes that your company already uses. While 360-degree feedback is very valuable, it typically occurs at the end of a year and therefore often lags in highlighting key issues. In a fast-changing world, you need a more active approach for getting coaching and real-time advice. While some of the activities suggested in this article (see sidebar, "Four ways to get started") may feel awkward at first, I would encourage you to overcome some initial discomfort in order to take greater ownership of getting feedback. By developing this mind-set, you will improve your ability to ask the right questions, as well as dramatically upgrade your effectiveness and the performance of your organization. ○

Robert S. Kaplan is a professor of management practice at Harvard Business School and cochairman of Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation, a global venture philanthropy firm. He was previously vice chairman of Goldman Sachs.

Copyright © 2011 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.
We welcome your comments on this article. Please send them to quarterly_comments@mckinsey.com.