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How To Encourage Candid Employee Feedback: 14 Tips For CEOs

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Leadership

For a CEO, honest feedback from your team can be invaluable for improving and growing your company. However, based on their past experience, some employees may be reluctant to vocalize their grievances, concerns or frustrations out of fear of reprisal or other negative consequences.

Because it can be nerve-wracking for them, it's important to actively encourage your team members to openly share their concerns and ideas. Below, members of Forbes Coaches Council share 14 strategies you can use to help employees feel more comfortable speaking up to provide critical feedback.
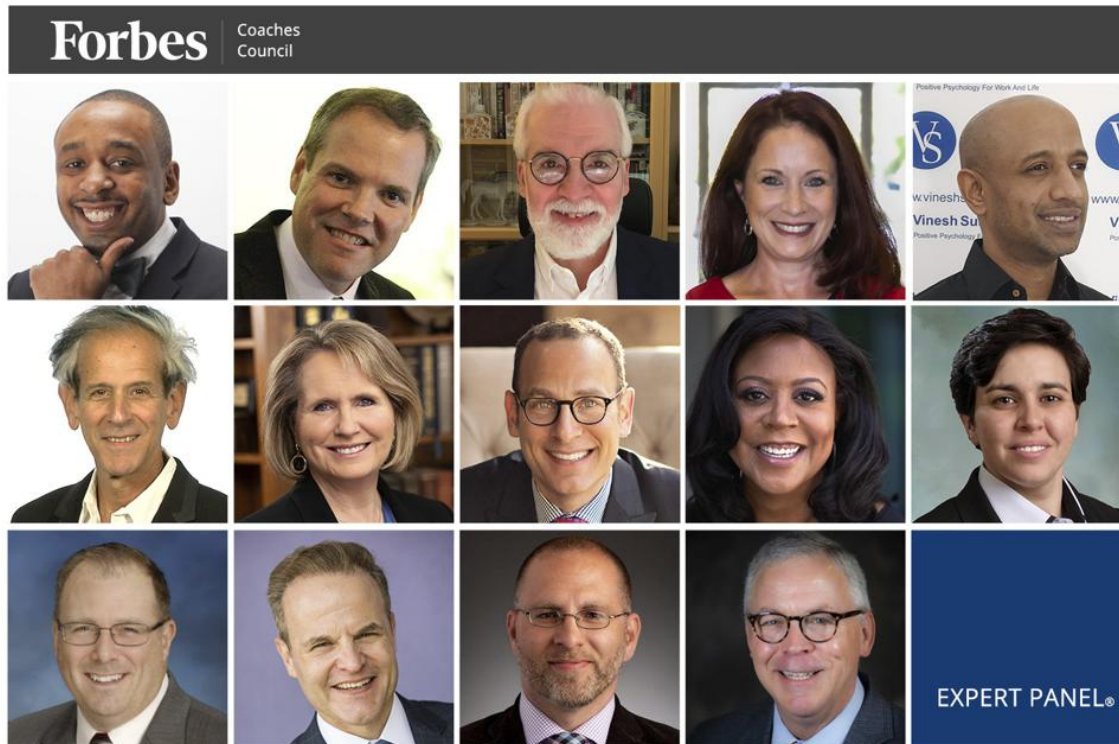
Forbes Coaches Council members offer tips to help CEOs gather honest feedback from their employees. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS.

1. Offer Different Opportunities To Be Vocal

I would offer different opportunities for them to be vocal. One is to conduct a yearly survey to gather feedback on their managers' performance; the other is to do pulse surveys that provide opportunities to give feedback on a more frequent basis. These formal systems make space for it to happen naturally. - Mike Ambassador Bruny, No More Reasonable Doubt

2. Run An Engagement Survey

A great tool for getting honest, non-retaliatory feedback is an engagement survey. Engagement surveys provide a safe space for employees to provide feedback on their manager, peers, organization and culture. A guided question portion followed by open response questions offers a blend of quantitative feedback framed within the qualitative context. - Brad Cousins, Ingage

Human Capital Strategies

3. Build Open Communication Into Your Cultural DNA

It all starts with building the right cement: the cultural DNA that fosters mutual trust, collaboration and open, clear communication. Focus on building the values, behaviors and rituals that you want to permeate all levels of the organization into your cultural DNA. Promote continuous feedback with a workspace where people can introduce ideas and innovate in their day-to-day activity. - Luis Costa, Luis Costa - coach · facilitator · speaker

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4. Adjust Your Reactions

We control our responses; so don't be so eager to jump all over a concern that you end up scaring your people. A big reaction from a CEO can be frightening to an employee, who may then fear that they have "stirred the pot." Listen and receive; don't react. If you feel as though you need to take action, do so with consideration for the employee who was brave enough to share. - Erica McCurdy, McCurdy Solutions Group LLC

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5. Train Your Managers To Listen

Employees share only when they trust that they will be listened to by a neutral manager. Managers should be trained on key styles of listening. Listening empathetically without interrupting works really well for understanding grievances. For concerns, listen impartially by asking questions to get the whole story. Ideas should be listened to, and good ideas should be acted upon instead of being put on the back-burner. - Vinesh Sukumaran, Vinesh Sukumaran Consulting

6. Create The Right Conditions

Encouraging what you want is useless. It focuses on you, not your people. Creating the conditions that will bring about what you want is useful. Fear of reprisal is the voice of your people telling you they don't feel safe. Encouraging people to be more vocal won't work. Creating a safe harbor will. When people feel safe, they will ask for the direction and support they need to succeed. - Jay Steven Levin, WinThinking

7. Act On The Feedback They Share

Actions speak volumes. How you listen and what you do with the information provided will matter. If employees do not see their insights and feedback in reports integrated into eventual changes, it will not be worth their time or the risk it takes to come forward and voice their feedback. You can "encourage" all day, but if they don't see change, speaking up won't be worth it to them in the long term. - Susan Madsen, Jon M. Huntsman School of Business

8. Have The Right Managers In The Right Places

An employee's willingness to be more vocal truly sits in the manager's hands. If they trust the manager, they will be more vocal. As the founder and CEO of your company, it is on you to ensure that you have the right managers in the right places and equipped with the right training to lead your people well. - Jon Dwoskin, The Jon Dwoskin Experience

9. Communicate Your Intent And Desired Impact

As a CEO, your perspective is broader and more global. It makes sense that you would not know the intimate details of your leaders' interactions with their teams. Communicating your intent in gathering additional insights, as well as the impact you are looking to gain as a result, will encourage others to open lines of communication. Intent and impact are essential elements for inclusion conversions. - Sheila Carmichael, Transitions D2D, LLC

10. Be The Example

When was the last time you did a public pre- or post-mortem explaining an experience you learned from? Demonstrating the exercise of giving and receiving feedback enhances your leadership, and this is part of the process. When we give and receive feedback well, it enables us all to develop. The most important step in this process is making sure something happens with the feedback you are given. - Natalie McVeigh , EisnerAmper

11. Hold Skip-Level Meetings

Every leader should hold skip-level meetings with the frontline employees who work with their managers. It is important to uncover instances where a manager might not be communicating

what's happening in the business. More importantly, the leader needs to identify blind spots with their managers, or simply bad management. Not being willing to listen to the employees will cause problems in your company. - John Knotts, Crosscutter Enterprises

12. Make It Authentic, Anonymous And Confidential

Keep it authentic, anonymous and confidential at the same time. Anonymity provides security, allowing employees to voice their experiences. Confidentiality means that any sensitive or identifying information is removed. Authenticity is achieved when a manager who receives feedback is supported in addressing it in an open, productive manner. Showing vulnerability is an additional plus. - David Yudis, Potential Selves

13. Show Gratitude For Their Input

If you want to encourage people to speak up, you need to create a psychologically safe workplace. Most people haven't had that experience in the past, so they are likely to feel tentative about sharing concerns or being vocal about the problems they see. They may fear retaliation or being branded as a problem employee. Build trust with your people by demonstrating gratitude for their input. - Jonathan H. Westover, Utah Valley University & Human Capital Innovations, LLC

14. Go First

One of the best ways a leader can get others to be more transparent in the workplace is to go first. Leaders who show humility and admit their challenges open the door for others.

Many founders and CEOs are reluctant to do this, but those who model the behavior first will have more success in getting others to do the same. - Dan Ryan, ryan partners

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