

The importance of giving positive feedback and the role of chiefs

Positive feedback, which companies often don't use for strategic reasons, can be a powerful tool for mutual understanding; a genuine meeting point between those who see and those who are seen.

I have lost track of how many chiefs and collaborators I met in my 18 years as a consultant and trainer. Without counting those I met when I worked in a company for many years (too many to mention!).

Like in the past, the main question today is still *"Why is it so difficult to give / receive positive feedback?"*. I am not the first one - nor will I be the last one, I think - to talk about this matter. And I will not do so by upsetting the important benchmarks of the psychological and managerial culture (it was very useful to me to study, among others psychotherapists, *Claude Steiner's* theory known as *"The stroke economy"*).

Should we put all the blame on proverbs?

I would like tackle this matter by referring to proverbs and by trying to answer this question, keeping in mind that there may be many explanations.

When I cover this subject in the classroom or during coaching sessions, I always like asking my interlocutors if they know any proverbs.

Proverbs give a true sense of popular wisdom. They represent our history. They describe past cultural and social contexts that probably influence our present.

More or less everyone knows a few proverbs. So, my question is: *"Do you know a proverb that has a completely positive message?"*. This may give rise to some doubts because proverbs that are not completely positive are often considered as such. I will use an example to explain this concept. The proverb *"Learn through mistakes"* is not positive to me. If it is true that one learns through mistakes, it is even truer that one learns by doing well! And if someone (including ourselves!) leverages what they have done well, in a more effective way than usual, it will be possible to reinforce that behaviour. If we are used to receiving positive feedback, we will be willing to reflect on our mistakes even more, to try and understand the causes and learn, to stop making them. A new version of this proverb could be *Learn through actions, success and mistakes*. Chiefs can really make a difference here!

It sounds obvious but it's not always the case. Hence the question, again: *"Why is it so difficult to give / receive positive feedback?"*

Proverbs come from the peasant culture, made of sacrifices and family relationships. In that environment, it wasn't easy to think of pleasant and rewarding situations, in fact it was more common to settle for what one had (*don't look a gift horse in the mouth*) or to

bring tasks forward to avoid wasting time. (*If you have time, don't wait for time. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.*)

Babies should be kissed at night ...

I would like to introduce the subject of positive feedback using the proverb "*Babies should be kissed at night, while they're asleep*".

This proverb is more known in Southern Italy than in Northern Italy. Perhaps there is a similar version that I'm not aware of.

The proverb has two meanings: an objective /complicated one and a subjective/complex one.

The objective complication had to do with the fact that men left home at dawn to work in the fields and came back at dusk (when it was dark). Therefore, they could not kiss their children during the day. They never saw them!

The subjective or complex aspect was a strategic one: children had to be asleep when kissed, otherwise they could be misled by false illusions ("*He who praises himself befouls himself!*").

To clarify what I'm stating, I will quote the poem **Children** by Lello Florio, where he mentions this proverb. The original poem is in Neapolitan and the translation is below.

CHILDREN

LELLO FLORIO

MY FATHER TOLD ME
THAT HIS FATHER TOLD HIM
THAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE KISSED WHILE THEY'RE ASLEEP.

NOW I UNDERSTAND WHY
I FEEL A BIT UNCOMFORTABLE
IF HE KISSES ME.

WHEN THEY'RE ASLEEP, CHILDREN
DO NOT KNOW
IF THEIR FATHERS HAVE KISSED THEM.

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG BOY,
I LONGED FOR
THESE LOVING GESTURES FROM MY FATHER.

BUT HE WAS INFLUENCED
BY HIS FATHER'S SAYINGS,
SO HE COULD NOT OFFER THEM TO ME.

I LAY AWAKE SO MANY NIGHTS,
WAITING FOR MY FATHER
TO COME AND KISS ME.

THEN, WHEN HE CAME,
I PRETENDED TO BE ASLEEP
AND COULDN'T HUG HIM,

I WAS AFRAID
THAT IF HE FOUND OUT
HE'D NO LONGER KISS ME.

WHEN THEY'RE ASLEEP, CHILDREN
DO NOT KNOW
IF THEIR FATHERS HAVE KISSED THEM

MY FATHER TOLD ME
THAT HIS FATHER TOLD HIM
THAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE KISSED WHILE THEY'RE ASLEEP.

BUT SOME SAYINGS
ARE WRONG,
NO POINT BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH.

I'VE BEEN SOMEONE'S SON,
BUT NOW I'M SOMEONE'S FATHER,
I MISSED THESE THINGS,

SO, I DO NOT WAIT
FOR THEM TO GO TO SLEEP,
I KISS MY CHILDREN WHEN THEY'RE AWAKE!

Positive feedback: recognising and nurturing oneself

Positive feedback is the simplest way to tell someone how much we appreciate what they do. It is the safest way to make someone understand which behaviours are effective. If we start from that far, we can understand why it is challenging to exchange positive feedback.

Chiefs spend much of their time relating with their collaborators. This poem is an invitation to good chiefs to consider the great opportunity they face: increasing positive feedback to generate a culture of recognition with the aim of nurturing contributions. This could also be an opportunity to dispel a taboo subject: chiefs, too, can receive positive feedback from their collaborators.

Awareness + Feedback = Value + Identity