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2-2019

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#### Citation

CHAN, David, "How to take feedback seriously" (2019). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 2806.

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# How to take feedback seriously

David Chan

Published in The Straits Times, 16 February 2019, p. A30.

Public responses to incidents are a valuable source of feedback. While negative feedback may cause discomfort, it is important for policymakers to learn to process and respond better to such views.

It is a common practice these days for people to assess or react to a product they buy, a service they receive, or performance or activity they took part in. Giving feedback has become very much a way of life.

Feedback is not restricted to customer service or performance appraisal situations. It can also refer to public reactions to an incident, expressed as evaluations, emotions and concerns.

People may have views on an incident, and also how they perceive the incident was handled or is being handled. Some recent cases come to mind - such as national servicemen training deaths, the SingHealth cyber attack and the HIV Registry data leak.

Public expressions on these matters are valuable feedback that reflects and reveals much. They are unsolicited real-life reactions to actual specific incidents and how they are handled. We hear the reactions in informal conversations. We read the public comments written in mainstream media and posted on social media, with a mix of reflective and visceral reactions.

A noteworthy commentary is a recent editorial in the local Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao that raised serious questions of leadership complacency, accountability and public trust in Government. The commentary, together with others, elicited a response from Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat last Saturday, published in both Lianhe Zaobao and The Straits Times.

Mr Heng stated that the Singapore Government has not "gone slack", such as becoming complacent and failing to hold senior people accountable when things went wrong. He reiterated that its leaders "will not flinch from taking a hard look at ourselves each time there is a failure, and doing whatever is necessary to put things right".

## SOLDIER DEATHS, DATA LEAK

Earlier this week in Parliament, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen and Health Minister Gan Kim Yong responded to questions on the recent soldier training deaths and the HIV data leak, respectively. The ministers provided some additional details to what were already made known to the public since the news broke.

The critical information on how the training deaths of the two national servicemen (Liu Kai last November and Aloysius Pang in January) occurred, and why, are currently not known. Hopefully, the two committees of inquiry will provide thorough and clear answers, and soon.

For the HIV data leak, we can expect differences in views among the public on the Health Ministry's "judgment call" in decisions and actions on when and what to tell who, with regard to the data leak. The ministry's statements also spark debate on the security of personal data the public entrusted to the Government. It also raises the issue of HIV and the stigma around it, which influenced decisions on whether to inform the individuals affected and the general public of a data leak.

Some will continue to have questions on how the event unfolded, the coordination among government agencies involved and their interactions and investigations with the two individuals in the centre of the data leak - American Mikhy Farrera Brochez and Singaporean Ler Teck Siang.

The HIV data leak incident is still evolving, with fresh information to emerge, and possible further public exposure of the leaked data. Also, not all of the affected individuals have been informed that their personal data was leaked.

Public reactions to the soldier deaths and data leak incident will continue. And they may become more negative or positive. The Government and its related agencies will have to decide how to respond to the evolving reactions to these recent adverse incidents, and future ones. Will the impending government-public interactions make things better or worse? It is useful to take a hard look at the feedback process applicable to previous and future exchanges.

#### MALADAPTIVE RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

If we misconstrue valid negative feedback and dismiss it as ignorant or malicious, we will fail to identify our mistakes to take remedial action. We will be positively reinforced to reiterate and repeat our maladaptive actions.

It will also create unnecessary ambivalence or distrust in the relationship with the feedback givers. We will also miss out potentially good ideas and solutions that can arise from addressing the issues associated with the negative feedback. The consequence is a rapid spiral of negative outcomes.

The first human reaction to negative feedback is unpleasant emotions such as anger and disappointment. This is followed quickly by defensive responses to justify our actions or inactions.

For example, when making sense of our failures, we often attribute too little weight to ourselves and too much weight to external factors such as the situation and the behaviours of others. Our defensive responses often include recounting the many good things we have done. We end up citing many things that, while good, are irrelevant to the negative feedback given.

Sometimes we are not defensive, but our initially sensible response becomes maladaptive when overdone or not well communicated.

It is true that everyone has a part to play in enhancing a positive climate for safety in military training and a societal culture of non-discrimination in treatment of people with HIV. But if we overemphasise collective responsibility or highlight it when the critical issue is something else, we will be perceived as attempting to detract or shift blame. We end up giving the public impression that we are actually saying "It's your fault too" or "It's your fault".

Another sensible response that can go wrong is emphasising that no system is perfect. The reminder is appropriate if the negative feedback stems from an unrealistic expectation that there must be zero errors.

But the emphasis backfires when the negative feedback comes about because of a series of similar or seemingly related errors.

The overemphasis occurs when we fail to appreciate how public expectations evolve and how this relates to negative public reactions. It is a myth to believe that people expect everything to be perfect and have zero tolerance for any mistakes.

People form expectations partly based on what they have experienced routinely. When unmet expectations upset people, it is often because their routine standards are frustrated - not because the standards did not achieve a perfect score. They react when lapses have personal consequences or severe outcomes that they can see affecting themselves, others or society.

Attempting to moderate public expectations or address unmet expectations by emphasising that perfection is impossible, or that human lapses do occur, misses the point.

In fact, trying to do so will only lead to perceptions that the Government is lacking in empathy, disconnected from ground sentiments or trying to shift the blame to alleged public irrationality.

What seems like a sensible response becomes maladaptive when we say the right thing at the wrong time or in the wrong way.

## TAKING FEEDBACK SERIOUSLY

How then to respond adaptively when people give us negative feedback? I suggest 11 basic principles.

- Spend less time listening to people who give you only positive feedback or agree with you on everything. This creates delusion of positivity and maladaptive responses to valuable negative feedback.
- Be honestly humble and seek more feedback from those who do not have similar background or views as you. Be open to the possibility that your view, conclusion or position may be mistaken.
- Understand that it is human to experience unpleasant emotions when the feedback is negative, but don't let the emotions affect your responses.
- Don't be defensive. It is not necessary to recount all the good things - it backfires when they are irrelevant to the core concerns in the feedback.
- Don't be patronising. People are not irrational and unrealistic in their expectations. Understand how recent incidents and related observations may have led to unmet expectations.
- Don't jump to conclusions. Ask people to elaborate on their negative feedback, which may reveal additional important feedback or misunderstanding of facts from the individual giving or receiving the feedback.
- Understand the emotions and experiences of the people involved including those providing the feedback. Learn to see things from their perspectives.
- Be transparent and accountable. Provide an honest and full account of what actually happened and how it happened. Explain and justify the actual considerations that went into the decisions made. Hold the right individuals responsible for their deeds and decisions. This must be done without fear or favour, both actual and perceived.
- Reinforce the value of integrity and position on zero tolerance for wrongdoings. Demonstrate with action, and not just give words of assurance that there is will to correct mistakes and get things right.
- Be prompt in responding. Lengthy delays and releasing information in a piecemeal fashion and at different times with no clear reasons will fuel cynicism. Preliminary statements or accounts may

be useful, but they should not come across as attempts to influence fact-finding and bias conclusions.

- Revise and adapt your responses in the light of reasonable feedback and new information that are credible and critical.

## BECOMING BETTER

We may say the above principles are obvious, and some leaders are already explicitly espousing one or more of these principles in public engagement. Yet, most of us don't practise them enough, well enough, or at all. We may even be repeatedly acting in maladaptive ways that go against these principles.

Advocating but not practising effective responses, plus repeated inadequacies, add to the angst and disappointment experienced by those who give feedback when they see that the feedback does not work. This is most unfortunate, especially when people at both ends of the feedback share the common goal of achieving better performance and outcomes in future.

So we need to learn to self-reflect. Be honest and humble. Be clear, courageous and constructive when responding to feedback. Take concrete corrective actions responsibly, and with accountability. We can prevent many inadequacies in feedback response and their unintended negative consequences. Adopt a principled approach to feedback response so that things become better - preventable adverse incidents will occur less frequently and we can co-create solutions to problems.

As people continue to give feedback, they may learn how to deliver it more effectively. Meanwhile, we need to take the feedback given seriously.

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