

Know Your Reputation and Advance Your Career

by Shari Harley

Unless you work in total isolation, you know that people have a tendency to talk *about* you – not *to* you. Many employees have no idea where they stand performance-wise in their organizations because, for the most part, colleagues or supervisors don't tell them. This lack of information leaves employees in the dark, not knowing what to do more, better or differently to benefit their careers.

If today was the day of your performance appraisal and I asked how your boss (or anyone else who provides input on your review) would rate you, you probably would not know. This lack of knowledge prevents you from managing your career. Not knowing someone's opinion doesn't mean you're not subject to it either. It's akin to getting a speeding ticket when you didn't know you were speeding – the cop doesn't care. He adds four points to your driving record, despite the fact you weren't aware of the speed limit. What's even more troubling is that employees often don't know all the people who impact their careers. People we interact with, even peripherally, often talk about us to the decision makers in our organizations. Often we don't know what is said about us, by whom or to whom. This lack of direct feedback presents obstacles to managing our careers and professional reputations.

Get the Truth and Eliminate Blind Spots

You may work for a manager who is generous and forthright with feedback, or you may not. If it's the latter, it doesn't really matter because you know there are people in your life who will tell you the truth (as they see it), if you ask them. I recommend assembling a core group of people who you can count on to tell you the truth. These are the people who know you well and have your back. They can be friends, family members, and current or past co-workers, customers or managers.

You might wonder, what can my mom or friends from high school or college tell me about how I behave at work? The answer is - a lot! We don't become different people when we go to work. We are who we are. If you're often late, cancel on commitments, or wear clothing that's not your friend, you most likely do those things both at home and at work. Likewise, if you devote great attention to detail, never break commitments, and always look great (in public), your friends and family know this.

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Identify a few people, personal and/or professional, who care about you and will tell you the truth. Inform these folks that you want to eliminate your blind spots. Ask them for specific feedback and promise that, no matter what they say and how hard it may be to hear, you will respond with, "thank you." Then be sure you do control your reaction. It's normal to become defensive when we receive feedback. But every time we become defensive, we train people it's not safe to tell us the truth. If you want people to be candid with you more than once, make it easy for them to share the

truth with you.

Questions to Ask Friends, Family and Co-workers:

- What's the first impression I make?
- If my co-workers were asked to talk about me when I wasn't present, what do you think they'd say?
- What do you think I'm like to work with?
- How have I exceeded your expectations in the past?
- How have I disappointed you in the past?

Questions to Ask Your Manager:

- What skills do I have that the organization values most?
- What contributions have I made that the organization values most?
- What mistakes have I made from which I need to recover?
- Who in the organization should I have a good relationship with?
- Who or what departments should I work closely with?
- Who impacts my reputation and the opportunities I have?

Yes, you can ask these questions and you won't feel mortified. Your boss will answer them and he (or she) won't be annoyed. I assure you, your boss has had few, if any, employees who have asked these questions and it'll be a refreshing change.

Remember, the right answer to feedback is, "thank you," regardless of what you may be thinking. The easier it is to give you feedback, the more you'll receive.

You may be thinking that what I'm suggesting is unrealistic. People either won't be honest, or you won't be able to take what you hear. The people who really care about you will be honest, and you can take it. You'll be better off than before you had these conversations. You might hear things that pleasantly surprise you. And, regarding the things you don't like – just because no one talked about them to you before, doesn't mean those behaviors didn't impact you. Now you can do something about them!

Take Control

We don't always know who talks about us and to whom. As a result, we don't always know all the people who impact our careers. If you don't know who whispers about you to the boss and upward to his boss – find out. Get out of the dark and take control of your reputation and your career!

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Shari Harley, author, international business leadership trainer/consultant and certified speaking professional, helps bring candor back to the workplace.

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