

Chapter 4

Interpersonal Feedback

The dreary London rain made it even worse. This was the seventh large government bid in a row to be lost and Andrew was somber. As Managing Director of a consultancy firm working for companies and governments throughout Europe, he was used to regular rejections. Losing a government tender was all part of the game, but for his Public Sector team to be thrashed seven times in a row was worrying. Andrew's firm had put a lot of effort into building up its bidding capability and generally they had been able to win every second or third project they had gone after. Getting a good 'hit rate' was very important, as much time and energy went into each bid and needed to be earned back on the projects secured. A low hit rate meant more and more costs that needed to be recovered over a narrower base of paid work.

Luckily the firm's other five teams were doing well. The Financial Services team was the absolute top performer, but the others – Industry, Media, Service Sector and Natural Resources – all made a healthy contribution to the firm, so Andrew was not worried about the firm's overall viability. What concerned him was that the Public Sector team, which in the past had been quite successful, now had little chance to meet their annual target. Strictly speaking that meant no bonuses at the end of the year and therefore a lot of disappointed employees.

As he got ready to sit down with Laura, head of the Public Sector team, Andrew reflected on what to say to her. Of course, they would do another 'post mortem', to try to understand why the latest project had been lost, followed by discussion on some improvement ideas. But Andrew was still contemplating what the tone of his feedback was going to be. On the one hand, he felt it was now time to be more demanding. Almost a caricature of British politeness, Andrew had always taken a friendly and factual approach to his review meetings, but maybe now was the right moment to be more challenging, even confrontational. Laura and her team were not living up to expectations and maybe putting pressure on them to step up would trigger the desired performance. During previous review meetings various improvement ideas had surfaced, but few had been implemented, so perhaps Andrew needed to confront Laura with these gaps and push her to act on them. Maybe he should also bring up the consequences of missing the team's annual targets. Not only would her team forfeit their bonus, but even the company-wide year-end pay-out would be lower, affecting everybody.

Yet, to Andrew it felt a bit harsh to 'kick somebody already on the ground'. He was quite sure that Laura was even more disappointed and worried than he was. Laura had been recruited into the firm six years earlier, in an unusual move to strengthen their public sector expertise and network. Normally the firm preferred to grow its own talent, but hiring a relatively senior consultant like Laura was seen as a quick way to build a position in this attractive market. From the very start, Laura had been a star performer. Moreover, being intelligent, confident and charming, she had rapidly won hearts and minds throughout the firm, leading to her promotion to department head last year. And now seven misses in a row.

Andrew had caught her gaze in the hallway earlier in the morning and she didn't look her confident self. Later, at the espresso machine, he overheard two senior colleagues from the Financial Services unit gossiping about the sad state of affairs in the Public Sector team and how they needed to get their act together – he assumed that these weren't the only voices Laura could hear behind her back. Maybe Laura was in more need of support than in need of reprimand. Yes, some things had gone wrong, but many more things had gone right. Andrew was certain that Laura was the right person for the job, so maybe that was what she needed to hear. Encouraging her to keep at it and not give up just might be more useful than demanding that she do better.

But wouldn't he be letting her off too lightly? Wouldn't he be sending a signal that poor performance had no consequences? As Laura entered his office, he stood up to greet her, still asking himself what type of feedback he should give – mostly comments or compliments?