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Pieces of eight: Questions that high-performing teams can answer and what I learned from asking them

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BVI Managing Partner Ellie Crespi shares her reflections on a recent feedback exercise with her team.

Last year I attended an excellent executive leadership course at Judge Business School. In one of the sessions, we were asked whether we could answer the following questions, and whether we thought our respective team members would be capable of doing so too. The theory is, that in high-performing teams, all team members are able to answer these comfortably and quickly.

- What's my role?
- How am I doing?
- Does anyone care about me?
- What's going on in the team?
- What's our strategy?
- What are our vision and values?
- How is the team doing?
- How can I help?

I realised that I actually had clear answers to all of these, and that this reflected well on the firm I had chosen to join eighteen months earlier, and those who manage me. In terms of whether my team could answer the questions, I resolved to speak to them as soon as I got back to the office, then spent the next couple of months trying to persuade myself that the exercise was pointless and would only cause everyone to feel very uncomfortable.

At the start of this year, resolutions pledged, I tasked all my team members to prepare for their first performance review by reflecting on the questions and coming ready to discuss. Here's what I learned from my team's feedback.

Asking these sorts of questions makes everyone feel a little uneasy. Judge Business School taught me that these discussions go towards creating a "psychologically safe" environment where open discussions can be conducted. The conversations were uncomfortable and that's a good thing, because the space outside our comfort zones is where we grow and learn.

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It is very worthwhile to share your strategy with your team. I probably cheated a bit by having the one-to-ones shortly after presenting the 2023 BVI strategy to the team, but nevertheless almost everyone was very clear on and bought into that strategy. This buy-in has in turn brought greater focus to their practices so I have a renewed appreciation for the importance of sharing strategic direction with team members.

Some people remember our values and even have favourites. At Judge Business School, in a room full of leaders, not everyone was able to cite their own firm's values. I was really touched therefore when a team member shared that their favourite Collas Crill value is 'Never standing still' and gave examples of things we do as a firm that underpin the value.

Apparently I have favourites too. One of my team members felt that one or two people in the office had more of a voice than others. This was a tricky one.

In my experience, a lot of the best ideas come from high performers, and those individuals earn more "consultation rights" as a result. But I am learning that innovation can come from anywhere, and am keen to create an environment where you don't have to shout the loudest to be heard.

You can never care too much. Almost everyone felt that no-one cared about them *enough* and a couple of team members felt that I didn't care *at all*. I found this feedback very humbling. There is often a huge gulf between perception and reality, and nothing could have demonstrated it more than asking this question.

On reflection, I realise I probably don't *show* how much I care because I am too conscious about seeming to be too soft or feminine in the workplace. Well, if there ever were a mandate to be more authentic then here it is...

Feedback is a form of caring. The course taught us to treat [client] feedback, and *especially the negative stuff*, as a gift: if I know what's wrong, I can fix it. I certainly applied that logic in gathering my team's perspectives, and put emotions aside in favour of listening and finding meaningful ways to fix things.

Done in the right way, feedback is a form of caring – supportive, constructive conversations to help us develop and grow. And, let's face it, we can all benefit from that.

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