

Inside Leadership

The X Factor has a strong message for all people leaders.

Brian MacNiece of **Kotinos Partners** asks “do we need more managers like Simon Cowell or in our businesses?”



Simon Cowell tells another hopeful, on the US version of his hit show X-Factor, that they “can’t sing” and that her dream is over. Flopping into the arms of a waiting loved one she tells the prying camera that the judges have made a big mistake. How did it come to this? Why did the poor kid think in the first place they had any chance of becoming the next Rhianna? How can she be so deluded as to her singing ability?

The answer is simple and is mirrored in a root cause of under performance in many businesses. Simon Cowell is the first person that the auditonee has encountered that has given her genuine, honest and direct feedback on her talent (or lack of it). He was

straight, to the point and accurate in his assessment. All her life, the girl has been told by her loved ones that she is a wonderful singer. In their heart they know that it is not true but none of them had the will to say so. She has had that message reinforced so many times that she believed it too.

The consequence of inaccurate and “soft” feedback is to significantly reduce the likelihood of high performance. If you are consistently told you are doing a good job when you are not, then it is natural that you will believe that too. Where this happens within an organisation you will find the following symptoms:

- lower standards become the norm – “ok is good enough”, “that will do” are

part of the culture

- poor performance is tolerated and not tackled
- people don’t know when they are not doing a good job and worse still are not held to account for not doing a good job
- the performance measurement systems are not well defined – as a result it is hard to distinguish the better performers from the poorer performers within the organisation
- the managers/leaders within the organisation have no mechanism for effectively managing their people’s performance.

The research we have carried out at Kotinos Partners into high performance environments shows that

effective feedback is one of the critical components in stimulating improved performance. Moreover, high performance people leaders do more than Simon Cowell does, as it is not just direct, honest feedback that is needed. In addition they possess the skills to use that feedback and coach people to drive improved performance.

They also build the structures and systems to ensure that the feedback acts as a positive driver of improved performance. For example:

- the leading arts, music and ballet schools carry out peer reviews of performance and provide detailed, rigorous feedback on the performers. The Royal Ballet, Julliard School of Music, Royal Academy of Dramatic Art are cases in point. These schools leave each student in no doubt as to how they are performing and the peer review process is carried out throughout the academic year so that the pressure on performance is constant;
- professional sport has developed very sophisticated mechanisms for analysing player and team performance and providing that feedback to the team. After every game the video analyst to the Irish rugby team, Mervyn Murphy, produces a customised DVD for each member of the squad highlighting their performance in the game and areas for improvement. He presents detailed analysis of the opposition in preparation for the next game.

The players are armed with a mountain of feedback on their performance and that of the opposition;

- the special forces in the military are ruthless in the standards they adhere to and provide detailed feedback on how the soldiers are performing on the minutest level of detail. The Navy Seals infamous introductory Hell Week sets enormous physical demands on the potential new recruits and the feedback process is as harsh as it gets – only the very toughest survive to go into boot camp and have a chance of becoming a Navy Seal;
- some businesses excel at the feedback component of performance but they are the exception not the rule. For example, every employee of Innocent drinks has a weekly coaching session, which complements a more in-depth monthly development conversation (“What are you doing to raise your game?”) and a full performance review every six months. To give another example from business, Toyota have gone as far as to try and assess the percentage of time in their role each employee is growing, learning or improving – they consider any time on the job when a person is not growing or improving “dead time - and have set a nominal target of trying to ensure it is at least 70%! Most businesses consider a six monthly review more than enough.

The fundamental principles that are common across these high performing environments in relation to feedback are, that they all:

1. Drive rapid improvement in performance through frequent, effective feedback;
2. Seek to create a ‘feedback rich’ culture, where people are open to feedback and managers are skilled in giving it – feedback should motivate people to improve;
3. Combine feedback with coaching support to enable and challenge individuals to apply the learning;
4. In the longer term, they equip people with the self-awareness of what success depends on (performance insight for their role) and with the ability to evaluate their performance – so they can give themselves ongoing feedback.

The key leadership/management skills required to bring these principles to life include:

- feedback and coaching skills
- the habit of recognising and highlighting good performance to reinforce it
- the ability and courage to have the tough conversations when required.

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