

The Impact of Direct Report Feedback and Follow-Up on Leadership Effectiveness

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Draft

A Study Involving over 8,000 Respondents in One of the 100 Largest Corporations in the United States

Background of the Study

One of America's largest corporations designed a custom leadership development process that was delivered to managers at all levels. The leadership development process was part of a larger cultural change effort that was sponsored by the CEO of the corporation. This overall change effort was viewed as a major success by important stakeholders, both inside and outside of the corporation.

As part of the leadership development process, every manager received feedback from his/her direct reports on a Leadership and Values Inventory. The Leadership and Values Inventory contained a series of items that described the attitudes and behaviors of a leader who was seen as effectively living the company's newly defined Values.

The feedback was confidential in two ways:

- 1) the summary report received by each participant did not identify individual respondents; and
- 2) the summary report was seen by only the participant and an outside consultant.

As part of a specially-designed leadership training program, the Leadership and Values Inventory summary feedback was provided to participants. Later the participants reviewed the results of the feedback with outside consultants. Coaching sessions generally lasted from 40-60 minutes. (Individual coaching sessions for middle managers and executives were held in person. Coaching sessions for first-line managers were conducted by telephone.) The sessions were designed to help participants better understand their perceived strengths and plan for change in areas for improvement.

Based upon direct report feedback, each participant was encouraged to:

- 1) pick one to three areas for improvement,
- 2) develop an action plan for desired change,
- 3) respond to each direct report concerning the areas for improvement and the plan for change,
- 4) ask direct reports for help in changing behavior, and
- 5) follow-up with direct reports to check on progress and receive further assistance.

In responding to direct reports, managers were asked to spend only 5-15 minutes in a focused, two-way dialogue. In following-up managers were asked to spend only a few minutes in a dialogue concerning progress on the previously identified areas for improvement.

Approximately eighteen months after initially providing feedback, direct reports were asked to again provide feedback to their managers using the Leadership and Values Inventory.

Three additional questions were added to the Inventory concerning:

- 1) their manager's degree of change in leadership effectiveness,
- 2) whether or not their manager responded to previous feedback, and
- 3) their manager's degree of follow-up (see Exhibit A).

Exhibit A:

Please complete this section only if this person received prior leadership inventory feedback from you.						
MEASURING CHANGE AND EVALUATING FOLLOW-UP						
1. Do you feel this individual has become more effective (or less effective) as a leader in the past year? (Please rate this person on his/her effectiveness concerning aspects of leadership she/he can control. Please do not consider environmental or organizational factors that are beyond this person's control.)						
<i>(Circle one)</i>						
Less Effective		No Change			More Effective	
-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
2. Did this person discuss what she/he learned from his/her previous leadership inventory feedback with you?						
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes						
<input type="checkbox"/> No						
3. How has this person followed-up with you on areas that he/she has been trying to improve? <i>(Please check one.)</i>						
<input type="checkbox"/> 5-Consistent (Periodic) Follow-Up						
<input type="checkbox"/> 4-Frequent Follow-Up						
<input type="checkbox"/> 3-Some Follow-Up						
<input type="checkbox"/> 2-Little Follow-Up						
<input type="checkbox"/> 1-No Perceptible Follow-Up						

Findings on Responding and Following-Up

A total of 8,208 direct reports answered the three questions on Exhibit A. This number is lower than the total number of employees in the company for three primary reasons:

1) the company had been involved in a major re-organization process and many direct reports had changed managers within the past 18 months;

2) a minimum of three direct reports were needed to receive feedback (for confidentiality) and some managers had fewer than three direct reports; and

3) some direct reports (for experimental reasons) answered the same questions using different scales.*

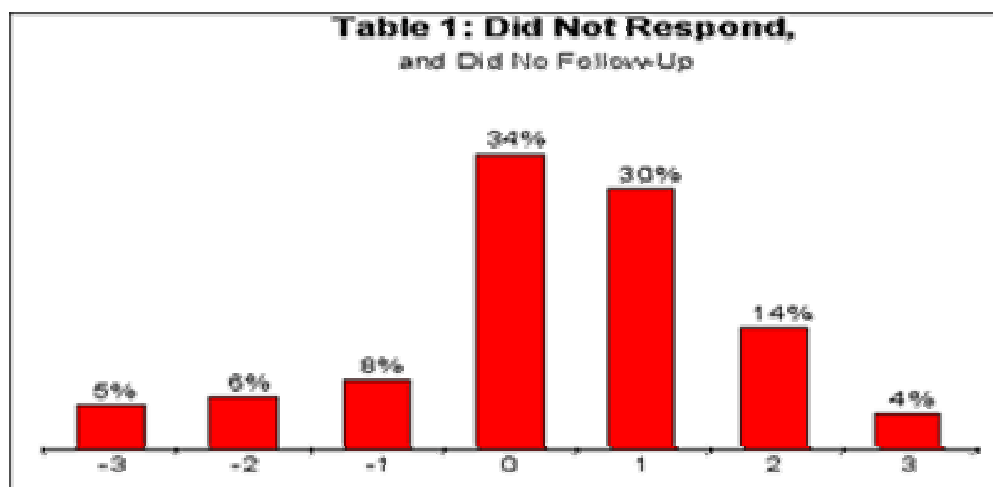
The results of the study showed the huge majority of participant managers (81%) were perceived as responding to their direct reports and/or doing at least a "little follow-up". More than half of the managers (58%) were rated in the "some", "frequent" or "consistent" follow-up categories (see Exhibit B). On the other hand, 19% of the direct reports surveyed said that their manager did not respond and did no follow-up. It is possible that some managers in the "did not respond / no follow-up" group actually did some follow-up, but the follow-up had so little impact that direct reports did not remember it 18 months later. However in leading people, impact is not determined by what leaders think they say, impact is determined by what direct reports hear.

Exhibit B:

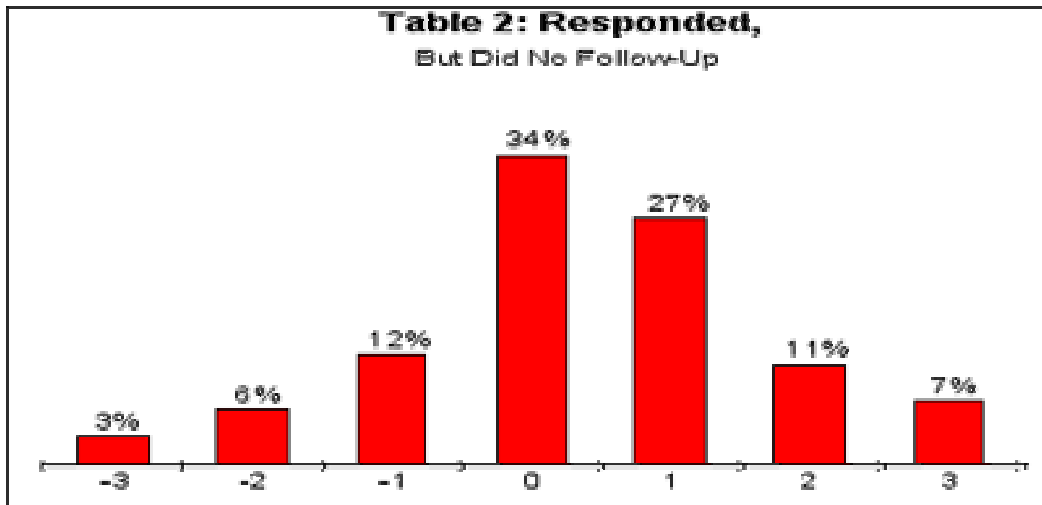
DIRECT REPORTS' RESPONSES

- My manager did not respond and did no follow-up 19%
- My manager did respond but did no follow-up 6%
- My manager did a little follow-up 17%
- My manager did some follow-up 30%
- My manager did frequent follow-up 17%
- My manager did consistent (periodic) follow-up 11%

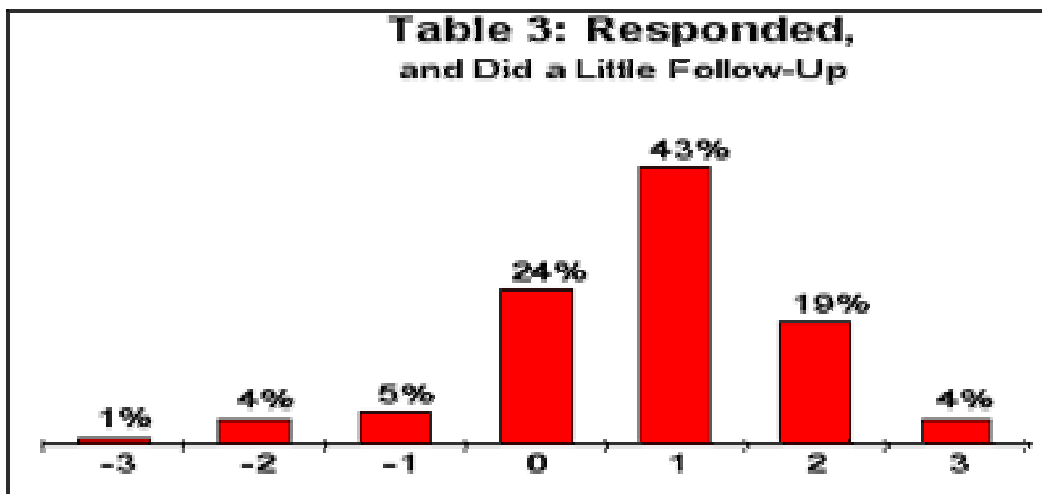
Findings on the Relationship Between Follow-Up and Perceived Leadership Effectiveness



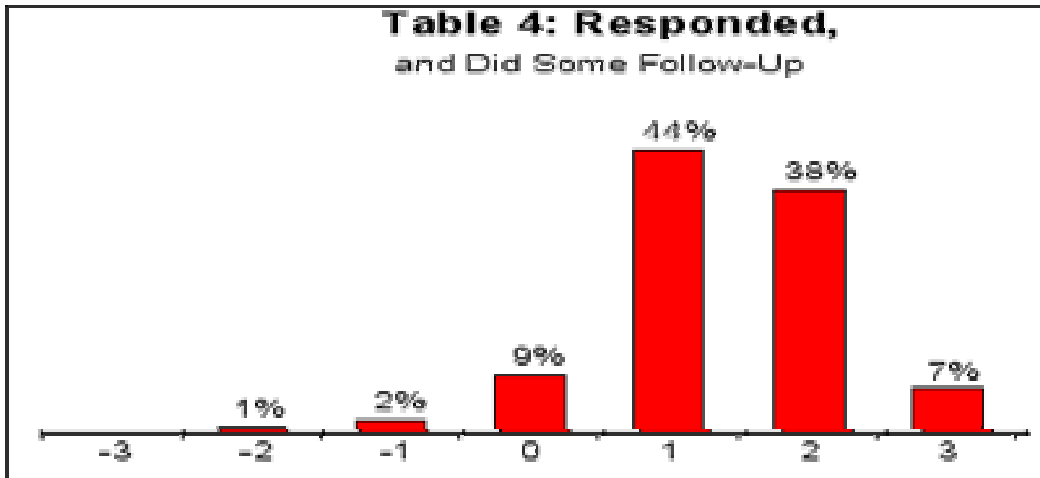
Managers who were seen as not responding to feedback and not following-up were perceived as only slightly more effective (as a group) than 18 months earlier. While 48% of the managers were rated as more effective, over half were rated as unchanged or less effective.



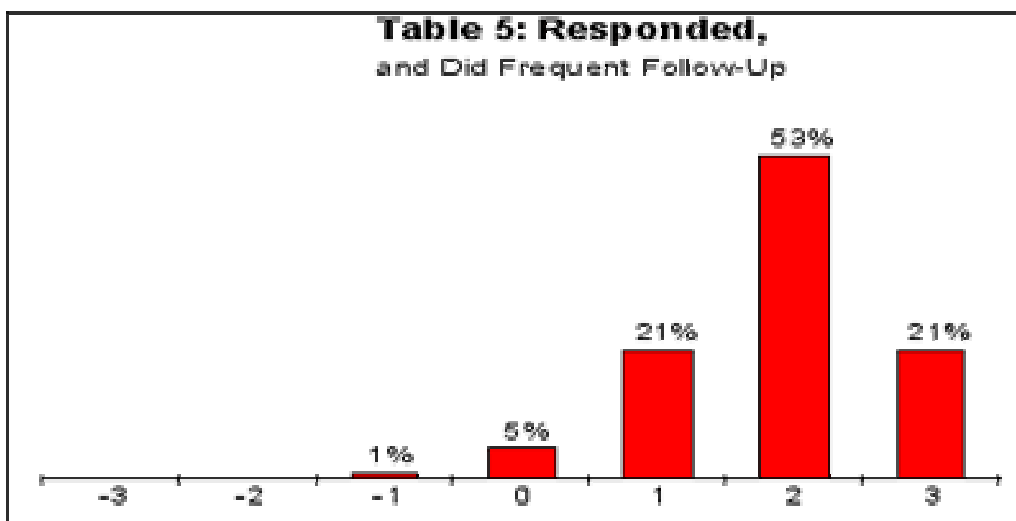
Managers who were seen as responding but doing no follow-up were perceived as no more effective than managers who did not respond at all. In fact, this group had the highest percentage of managers who were seen as getting worse (21%). One possible explanation for these results is that leaders who respond to feedback, promise change and then do nothing different may well be perceived by their direct reports as less effective. Raising expectations without delivering results can be a formula for increased dissatisfaction and decreased respect.



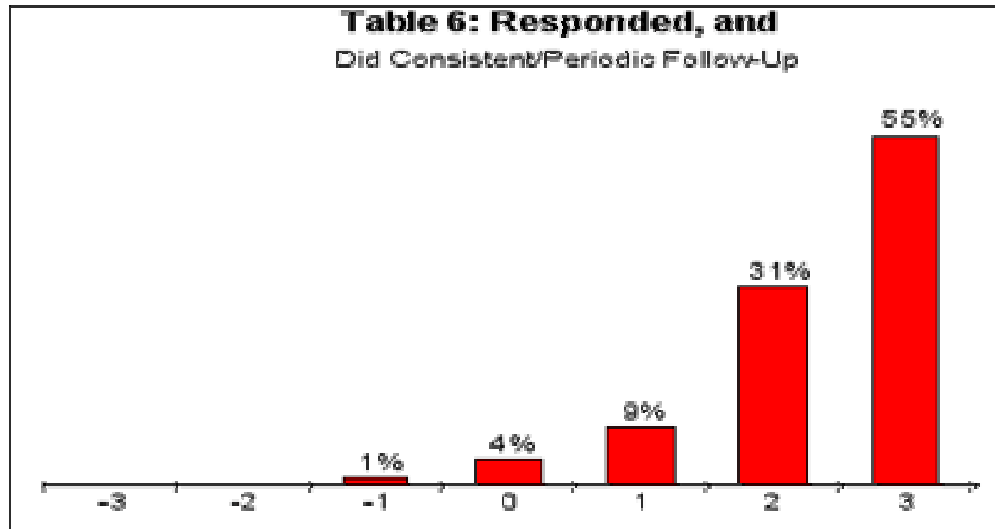
This Table shows the positive impact that even a little follow-up makes. Approximately two-thirds of the leaders in this group were viewed as more effective, with one-third rated as unchanged or less effective. The percent of leaders rated as less effective (10%) was approximately half that of Table 1 (19%) or Table 2 (21%). The "+2" and "+3" scores increased to 23%.



Managers rated in this Table, the some follow-up group, experienced another positive shift in scores, with 89% being rated more effective. Almost half of the leaders in this group (45%) were rated in the highest two categories (+2 or +3). The scores in the highest two categories almost doubled the scores from the "little follow-up" group.



Leaders who engaged in frequent follow-up were almost invariably perceived as more effective (95%). Almost none were seen as getting worse. This group also showed a major increase in the +2 and +3 categories. This Table has three times more leaders in the highest category (21%) as those in Table 4 (7%).



This Table shows the dramatic positive impact of consistent or periodic follow-up. Over half the leaders (55%) are rated in the highest possible category, while 86% are rated either +2 or +3.

Related Research

This study represents the responses of over 8,000 people in one of the 100 largest corporations in the United States. The results of this study have been replicated in research involving thousands of people in six major corporations. (Occasionally slightly different scales were used and slightly different questions were asked – the trend of the scores was always the same.) Related research is under way involving the perceptions of direct reports from over 20 different countries. So far, the results have been remarkably consistent.

Research is also being conducted concerning feedback from team members and customers. Initial results point to a very similar pattern - team members and suppliers who ask for feedback, respond in a positive manner and follow-up, are seen as dramatically increasing in effectiveness (by their team members and customers).

Conclusions

Peter Drucker has said that, "The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask." This study validates the importance of asking. By asking for feedback, analyzing the results, developing a focused action plan for change and following-up (which is really asking again), leaders will almost invariably be perceived as more effective. Initial research indicates very similar results concerning team member and customer feedback.

While a great deal of corporate time money and effort is spent on training, very little is spent on follow-up. This research shows the powerful impact that ongoing follow-up can have in changing leadership effectiveness.

What has been learned?

Follow-up works. Many leadership development efforts focus exclusively on the "front-side" of the development process (impressive training, well-designed forms, clever slogans, and lots of "flash"). They do not focus on the "back-side" of the development process - the ongoing application of what is being learned.

This study shows that what leaders do "back on the job" is a lot more meaningful to employees than what leaders do in classrooms. This study reinforces a point that is critical to organizational change efforts. The "quick-fix" is not the answer. Each leader in this study attended the same program, taught by the same instructors and received feedback from the same Leadership Inventory.

While most leaders were seen as benefiting greatly, some were seen as wasting their time. The major variable impacting change was not the program but the process that followed.

Recently, one of our client executives was asked, "How much have you spent on programs of the year?" He replied, "Tens of millions of dollars!" He was then asked, "How much have you spent on follow-up?" He replied, "Tens of dollars!"

Many organizations are spending millions of dollars on programs and almost nothing on follow-up. KGC's research indicates that far more effort needs to be placed on the follow-up required to ensure positive, long-term cultural change.

By developing processes that ensure ongoing feedback and follow-up, organizations can help leaders develop in a manner that requires less resources and produces much greater positive, measurable change in effectiveness.