#186: I'm all ears: Improving your organization through active listening

VOICEOVER
Welcome to Up Close, the research talk show from the University Of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER COOK
I'm Jennifer Cook, thanks for joining us. If your boss asked you to define your goals, what would you answer? What if he asked if you could build consensus through give and take and facilitate win/win business outcomes? If you answered world peace to the first question and glazed over at the rest, the chances are you are a survivor of the workplace performance appraisal. You may have even met key performance indicators or KPIs and significantly exceeded expectations. But just how effective is this oddly ritualistic review of employees that has come to dominate the modern workplace. Today's guest looks at the performance appraisal and asks the simple question, can we do it better? Avraham Kluger is an Associate Professor at the Jerusalem School of Business Administration at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Avi has developed the feed forward technique, which relies on the employer listening properly to the experience of their employees. He says it is this listening that is the key to business success. Avi, thank you for joining us on this episode via Skype.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
You're welcome.

JENNIFER COOK
Now, could you please set the context for us of the standard performance appraisal and then go on, perhaps, to tell us what its theoretical underpinnings and assumptions are?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Well, as early as 1905 I found that people started to research the effect of what was known at that time as knowledge of results, effect on performance and people were fascinated in the beginning of the 20th century with the possibility that just saying [a] few words about your performance, your performance will go up. However, in the 50s, some reviews were done of 50 years of research or knowledge of results and erroneously concluded that it's always effective. Even the data that was available in the 1950s have shown that sometimes letting people know how well they're doing...
makes their performance go down. For example, in 1935 a person named Mace found out that high school students' performance go down if they're given the opportunity to know the results of their daily quizzes, relative to students that were quizzed but were not given the grade back. So the data from early on was showing that feedback is a double-edge sword. Now, let me define what I mean by feedback. I'm talking about a simple question, can I tell you something about your performance and whether my talk about your performance will make a difference to your performance. Given this question in the 90s, I've published something called The Meta-analysis, that is a statistical review of all the experimental evidence that was accumulating over 90 years of research. Over 600 experiments carried out on more than 20,000 people, this accumulation was showing that, yes, on average feedback improves performance somewhat, but in 38 per cent of the published reports, performance went down after feedback. So the question is, well, what type of feedback was it that made performance go down? Most people think, oh it probably was negative feedback. We looked into that and we found a puzzle, the effectiveness of feedback appears not to be related on average to whether the feedback was positive or negative. That is, you can improve performance both with negative and with positive feedback and you can do the same to debilitate performance.

JENNIFER COOK
Give me some examples of that, Avi.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Well, I'll give you an example where positive feedback will make you stop doing something. Suppose your accountant is telling you all your papers for the tax person are ready and organised and even he or she will compliment you in saying, I've never seen such an organised file, you're really good. What would you do with this positive feedback? My prediction, almost nothing, maybe you would like yourself, maybe next time you think about yourself as an organised person, but your immediate reaction would be, I can go to the beach, I have nothing to worry about, so positive feedback sends a signal of stop working.

JENNIFER COOK
You relax.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
You relax. However, imagine the same person telling you, oh you're in trouble, you're missing receipts, your papers are disorganised, you're really in deep trouble. You've got negative feedback about your performance. I predict that you'll be working very hard to correct the problem. So it may appear that negative feedback mobilises us more than positive feedback. But let me give you an opposite example. Now, it will be related to something that you really want to do. Suppose you have an idea for an interview that you really like and you think, well, this will make a really amazing radio show and you share it with your producer. Suppose that producer is saying, that's not going to work, so you got negative feedback. The previous example is the tax person, negative feedback will mobilise him. How is the
producer - negative feedback may debilitate you, may cause you to say, okay, let's forget about it, let's move on? However, imagine the opposite, that the same producer is telling you, wow, such a great idea. I predict that you might not sleep at night thinking, what else may I do with this great idea of mine and how I'm going to elaborate on it? That took some years to figure out that feedback is very complex. What I'm saying now is, in more academic terms, positive feedback is good for performance, if the person is doing something out of desire, what Tory Higgins of Columbia University calls, promotion focus.

JENNIFER COOK
It seems such a complicated concept, doesn't it, because of course we're dealing with human beings and their motivations and their sense of fear and their desire?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Yeah, if you think about it feedback is about me telling someone something about their performance, so it's about the telling, it's about the talking and in the organisational setting it's about the supervisor, or the employer, telling their employee something about their performance. And I'm asking the question, what would happen if you instead of talking to the employee you would listen to the employee? If you want to improve performance, listen to their experience of superior performance and try to understand what makes them in their own eyes excel and perform very well. Now, the complexity of feedback, indeed, is involved with threatening the self, threatening the self-esteem of the person being involved and listening can undo this threat. Not any listening, but listening that is designed to understand, as Carl Rogers, the great clinical psychologist of the 20th century called it, listening for understanding. So now imagine if instead of telling your employee where they failed and where they excelled, you listen to the employee, first, where they excelled in their own perception and not only are you listening in general, but also asking them to tell you a story, because a story has a power to engage you as a listener and will reduce the threat for most people. I'm not saying for all but for most and will allow you, with the employee, understand conditions that make performance be really superior.

JENNIFER COOK
On Up Close, this episode we're speaking about the power of listening as a way to improve business performance and our guest today is Associate Professor Avi Kluger. I'm Jennifer Cook. Now, Avi, you did mention Carl Rogers, do you differ from his views?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Just a little bit.

JENNIFER COOK
Or do you build upon them?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
I'll say that Carl Rogers even wrote for managers in the early 50s, a paper at the
Harvard Business Review called Barriers and Gateways to Communication, in which he gave examples of typical communication with employees and real listening. He made a point that when we hear someone say something like, oh that was a good radio show; we will feel inclined to give our own judgment. Yeah, I thought so too, or nah, that was not such a good radio show. So he pointed out that we have an inclination to judge on the spot. He said what would have happened if instead of judging we would ask, why did you think it was such a good radio show? What it made it you think, what it made you feel, that is the secret? With that I totally agree with him, but I will say that some people have difficulty in being listened to. Some people are so used to being alone in their soul, what I will call avoidant-attachment style, that any sign that somebody's really interested in me could be threatening for them. So on that I differ with Rogers.

JENNIFER COOK
Avi, you've talked about listening and the importance of feedback, both positive and negative. Now, how do these dovetail into your technique, which you call, feed forward?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Sure. Feed forward is discovering the standard that you need to use to flourish, that the other person needs to flourish. There are many means to find this standard and that is, what are the conditions that you need to feel very well? Feed forward begins with stating a general topic, for example positive experience at work. It continues with asking for a story about a moment at work during which the person felt full of life, just because of the process the person was engaged at work and before the results were known. Then it moves into the climax of the story, checking out the emotions experienced at their climax, to make sure those are emotions that a person would like to replicate. And then it tried to figure out the conditions that made the person feel so good at work, looking at those emotions as a signal that something very good was happening at work. Usually it's superior performance, the person excelling in some aspect of work and then setting the feed forward question, which is creating a discrepancy between the conditions just discovered. For example, a person may discover I had autonomy. This is a condition that maybe necessary for the person to excel at work. The feed forward question, to what degree do we have this condition right now at work? And if there is a discrepancy, what are you going to do to reduce this discrepancy? So feed forward is similar conceptually to feedback in some respect. In feedback someone at the organisation is telling you what is the expected level of performance and someone is also telling you how well you are doing relative to that standard. Feed forward does a similar thing only that the standard and the reading of reality is not given by external force, external agent like your supervisor, but is invited to be created by oneself. That is, you tell me what is your standard and you tell me how well you are doing relative to your own standard. This is the difference. By the way, the feed forward technique is based on what's known as the appreciative interview of the appreciative inquiry theory and model of organisational change.

JENNIFER COOK
So Avi, it seems a wonderful place to introduce you to Katherine Smith, who is sitting in the studio with me. Katherine is the editor of Melbourne University's Voice magazine and she's volunteered, Avi, for you to try the feed forward technique on her. So let's see, Katherine, are you nervous?

KATHERINE SMITH
Yes.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Katherine, hello.

KATHERINE SMITH
Hello, how are you?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
I'm good. I hear that you're nervous. I want to promise you that whatever is not comfortable, I will not push, I will not ask details. My goal is whatever we're going to talk about now will make you feel better. No matter how good you feel right now; I want you in a few minutes to feel better. Are you okay with that?

KATHERINE SMITH
Okay. That sounds good.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So Katherine, I'm sure that in your work you had both negative experiences and positive experiences. Today, if it's possible, I would like to talk with you about a positive experience at work, is it okay?

KATHERINE SMITH
Sure.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So Katherine, could you please tell me about something you did at work and while you were doing it, you felt good, you felt that you were getting energy from the activity that you were engaged in, even happy or perhaps elated, even before the results of your action became known to you?

KATHERINE SMITH
Okay. An example is when I interviewed an academic from the university today. He's an expert in IT and it's applications amongst young people, social networking. And when you said energise, that resonated with me, because I felt really stimulated by his thoughts. We were sharing a conversation, sharing ideas and our mutual experiences of using social media and feeling energised by all that he was talking about, was an experience that I thought was really great today.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Katherine, let me see if I got your story. You were interviewing an IT academic and
you were talking about social media and you were interested in communicating emotions. While interviewing him, you were exchanging ideas and while you were exchanging ideas you said that you were resonated with the word energised. Is that the story?

KATHERINE SMITH
Yes. And I didn't have in my mind a very clear idea about how I was going to write the story yet.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So what you're adding to this story is that you don't have a full picture of how it's going to look like, so you're going in with an open mind and the conversation is just open. Is that right?

KATHERINE SMITH
Yes.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Anything else that is worthwhile adding to this vignette, to this little story?

KATHERINE SMITH
Just I felt quite relaxed talking to him and he seemed to be enjoying the conversation as well, so that always helps.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So this conversation was good for you also, because he gave you the feeling that he's interested in being engaged in the conversation?

KATHERINE SMITH
Yes.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Anything else in this story?

KATHERINE SMITH
I don't think so.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So Katherine, what was the climax for you in this interview with the IT person?

KATHERINE SMITH
I guess the disclosure that he made that even though he researches in the area of application of social media in student teaching and learning, so using iPads and iPhones in learning, he still had reservations that he disclosed to me about whether it was a good thing that people were learning to write in very abbreviated emotional ways and that they weren't able to actually engage their emotions in their own words. So they used emoticons and they sent links and images, but they didn't have the
self-reflection to put their own emotions into words. I thought that was really interesting and unexpected coming from him, because I thought he'd be talking about the positives of applying technology in teaching and learning situations.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So at the moment, did the IT person disclose that he has reservation about the thing he is researching? What passed in your mind?

KATHERINE SMITH
I thought, I agree with you. I was aware that he, perhaps, was a different sort of person than I had expected and that was a positive kind of revelation to me, he valued imagination.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So the moment that you realised I'm surprised, but I agree and there's something human, very important to me happening now in the conversation, how did you feel?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
I felt, as you say, it was human. It was like, yeah, this is a good exchange. He didn't respond to me in the kind of a stock standard way, he was genuinely reflecting as well at the time. So we were both engaged in a real, a genuine conversation, rather than classic interview style conservation. So it felt like an authentic, a very authentic experience.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Very authentic experience. Katherine, the most difficult question and perhaps you cannot answer it, but how did it feel physically that there is an authentic communication at that particular moment?

KATHERINE SMITH
I think I just felt relaxed. I don't think I was aware of it. I was engaged with the conversation in my head, relaxed and focused on what I was doing.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
This feeling of engaged, relaxed and focused, is it a type of a feeling you would love to have at your work?

KATHERINE SMITH
Definitely, yeah.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So let's move on and let me ask you what made it possible? I want the audience to think about their own work, when was the last time you felt authentic and just focused, relaxed, engaged? What had made it possible for you, Katherine, to be in that moment, that is what facilitated this event?

KATHERINE SMITH
I guess it's because I'd thought up the topic for this story myself, it didn't come from outside, so it was generated by my own interest.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
So one condition that made it possible, is it's something that you desired to do?

KATHERINE SMITH
Yes and that I had autonomy in that situation.

KATHERINE SMITH
Yes, you are autonomous, you choose to do something out of desire. So Katherine, I'm going to stop right here, but we could also look at the other party that was collaborating with you. Now, we have the conditions, or some of the conditions that you need to flourish at work. That is you need autonomy, you need to work on something you desire to do, you need the time to do it and you need a partner. These create moments of authenticity of focus, while being relaxed at the same time, this is part of what would suggest to all managers, your superior performance. And if I were your manager it would be my job to help you figure this out and then ask myself, what do I need to do now that I know the conditions that you need, to make sure that you have them to facilitate your performance? This is in essence the feed forward interview.

KATHERINE SMITH
Interesting. Thank you.

JENNIFER COOK
Thank you for that, Avi.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Thank you.

JENNIFER COOK
That was Katherine Smith, she is the editor of Melbourne University's VOICE magazine and she was just going through the experience of the feed forward technique with our guest today on Up Close, Associate Professor Avraham Kluger from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Katherine, how did that feel for you?

KATHERINE SMITH
It was quite interesting, a little bit uncomfortable talking about oneself.

JENNIFER COOK
Also too, an artificial situation here? in the studio.

KATHERINE SMITH
Yeah, exactly, yeah.

JENNIFER COOK
?where you don't have that privacy.
KATHERINE SMITH
But it was still quite an engaging conversation.

JENNIFER COOK
Avi, we've just heard Katherine go through the feed forward technique. Now, she handled it quite well, she was confident, but you said there are personality types that aren't going to respond to this feed forward technique.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Yes.

JENNIFER COOK
Not only personality types, I'd like to know have you come across cultural obstacles to this process.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
First, personality. I'm looking at the avoidant-attachment style and in laboratory experiment that my former student, Dr Eyal Rechter carried out, we found out that moods of people improve after the feed forward, negative moods decline, but mostly for people who have secure-attachment style, that is, they are comfortable being engaged with other people. The avoidant people they felt worse after feed forward interview. However, they also felt worse after a typical interview, a control interview, meaning that any human interaction may bother them. And this is in the short term, but observing students of mine in MBA and Executive MBA classes, I see that some people show a lot of resistance to this type of activities at class one or two. After seven, eight or nine classes they are melting and they are saying, well, I didn't think it's relevant. I was confused, but now that the time goes on, I get a lot of benefit from opening up. We have to understand that listening and communicating is odd for many of us that are so used to living alone, at least emotionally. Communicating emotionally is very difficult for some of us, but based on Bowlby's attachment theory and Mikulincer and Shaver's progress that they made in the past 20 years in understanding how valid this theory is, I think the secret for thriving, the secret for growth, is hidden in improving relationship. Improving relationship will create improving performance. As for culture, I've used feed forward with Jordanians, with Greek people, in Belgium, in Canada, with Chinese over the phone, in Germany, in Sweden and of course, with many Israelis. I didn't notice any serious cultural barrier to carrying it, but I've never so far measured it quantitatively.

JENNIFER COOK
Now, your studies, Avi, have shown some quite startling connections between a boss' listening skills and the health of his or her employees, hasn't it?

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Yes, a study that is being completed now and is [a] replication of a Japanese study, asking supervisors to describe their own listening behaviour and independently asking subordinate to report their own well-being and their chronic emotions at work. What the Japanese and we found in replicated is that managers that listen well have subordinates who are healthier. This is really amazing and we're going to test it in
the laboratory in a controlled way showing not only that the two are correlated, but the listening of the other is the cause, or part of the cause, of the well-being of the subordinate.

JENNIFER COOK
There was also some advantages for the boss who was a good listener in the way they were perceived by their workers. Tell us about that.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Well, I've started to collect data for a meta-analysis on listening and I'm stunned. The correlations that are found between subordinates reporting how well the supervisor's listening and subordinate reporting how good the leadership skills are of their supervisors are huge, meaning that if you want to be perceived as a transformational leadership, as an inspiring leader, your listening to subordinates is a key aspect of it. This is really surprising by the extent, not the existence of the relationship, but the strength of this relationship. In addition we saw that supervisors who are listening create better job satisfaction among their employees. And again, the correlations are huge. It seems that the quality of listening that the supervisor gives to subordinates is the key determinant of many outcomes that are of great interest, both to organisations and to organisational behaviour scholars.

JENNIFER COOK
Avi, what a wonderful place for us to conclude this discussion about the power of listening. Thank you so much for joining us today.

AVRAHAM KLUGER
Thank you very much.

JENNIFER COOK
That was Avraham Kluger, Associate Professor at the Jerusalem School of Business Administration, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was speaking with us via Skype, about how the art of listening can be the key to business success. Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on 21 February 2012 and our producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bemmel; audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by Eric van Bemmel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jennifer Cook, until next time, good bye.

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