

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT FEEDBACK



I'm reading the email for the third time, and it's not getting any friendlier.

"Complaint regarding the management behavior of the sales department head. Several employees report being belittled in meetings, receiving unrealistic targets, and experiencing a climate of intimidation." Signed by the HR Business Partner.

Among them: "Please provide clarification as soon as possible."

I lean back. The name on the email isn't just anyone. It's Stefan, our sales manager. High performance, good numbers, strong public image. A man who has often been praised as a driving force. And yet, for months now, someone I've sensed is growing increasingly stifling around him.

I haven't addressed it yet. Not because I haven't seen it, but because I've been hesitant. It's important for the business. It's not easy. And I know my own pattern: I wait until the moment is "right."

Now he's here.

Not just suitable, but urgent.

I'll schedule an appointment with him for the next day. "Quick chat," I'll write. No warning in the subject line. I don't want to put him on the defensive—but I don't want to start off on the weak either.

In the evening, I stay at the office late into the night. I mentally rehearse the conversation. How do I say it clearly? How do I maintain rapport? How do I stick to the facts without hurting anyone?

I hear the coach who has been supporting our management team for months: "Giving feedback courage means telling the truth in relationships."

No moralizing. No safe haven. Truth in relationship.

The next morning, Stefan arrives punctually. Confident as always. He sits down and smiles briefly. "Kathi, what's this about?"

I feel my body go cold for a moment. Not fear. More like the heaviness that comes with clear conversations.

"Stefan," I begin calmly, "I would like to talk to you about feedback on your leadership behavior."

His smile lasts briefly, then fades. "What kind of feedback?"

"Several employees have contacted me," I say, maintaining eye contact. "They are experiencing devaluation in meetings, a sharp increase in targets and pressure, and an atmosphere that breeds fear."

He leans back. "This is pretty tough. Do you know how high the pressure is in sales right now? Without pressure, we don't deliver."

"Pressure is real," I say. "Devaluation is a choice."

He blinks. That's the point at which he realizes I didn't invite him to a discussion.

"What exactly does devaluation mean?" he asks more sharply.

"I'll stick to examples without naming names," I say. "In three meetings over the last four weeks, you addressed employees in front of the group with phrases like, 'That's ridiculous' or 'Did you even understand what this is about?' Furthermore, target adjustments were announced with the statement: 'Anyone who can't manage this should consider whether they belong here.'"

He wants to say something. I briefly raise my hand. "Please let me explain further."

He presses his lips together and nods.

"The effect is that people no longer speak openly, hide mistakes, and risk their health. This is not just a cultural issue. It is a performance risk."

His gaze hardens. "That makes it sound like I'm the bad guy here. I'm busting my ass."

I nod. "I can see that. And I know how much you're carrying. I'm not saying that to put you down."

I say this because you're at a point where your behavior is jeopardizing your success.

He remains silent. I sense something stirring within him. Defenses are like a shield—they don't fall immediately. But sometimes they crack when someone persists respectfully.

"What do you want me to do now?" he asked quietly.

I exhale. Now comes the part that not only states the truth, but also gives direction.

"I want three things," I say. "First, that you acknowledge that this effect occurred—regardless of your intentions. Second, that we agree on concrete changes in behavior. Third, that you seek support to manage pressure differently."

He looks at me. "Support?" "Yes," I say. "We have an external coach who can support you. Not as a punishment. As sparring before things get out of hand. I think it's wise." He seems hurt for a moment. Then tired. "You mean I need coaching." "I mean, we all need a mirror sometimes before we lose something," I say. "And I don't want to lose you. But I also don't want you to lose people." That's the sentence that hangs in the air.

He looks out the window for a long time. Then he says quietly, "I didn't see it that way." "I know," I say. "But it's there."

A pause. Then another, smaller admission: "I'm hardly sleeping at all these days. I constantly feel like we need to be even faster. And then... I crack." I nod. "That's human nature. But it's not manageable if you just dump it on the team without thinking." "Okay," he says. "What are the specific agreements?"

We'll get practical. No pedagogy, no "from now on, please be nicer."

We define:

No more derogatory remarks in groups. Criticism should be directed at the issue at hand, not the person.

Objectives stated without threats. No hints of termination or replacement.

Weekly 1:1 check-ins with two key people to reflect on impact.

Coaching sparring sessions will begin next week, initially six sessions.

He writes it down. I can see him getting serious. Not enthusiastic. But ready.

"And how are you going to get back into the team now?" I ask.

He stares at his sheet of paper. "I don't know." "Then let's formulate it together," I say.

We'll write down three sentences he'll say in the next meeting. No big deal. But it's a responsibility.

"I have received feedback that my tone in recent weeks has been hurtful."

"That was not okay, regardless of the pressure I exerted."

"I'm working on it and I want you to tell me early if it happens again."

As he leaves, he seems smaller. Not broken—more human.

In the evening, HR texts me: "Thank you. We were worried it would be soft." I smile briefly. I was worried too. That's precisely why it was necessary.

Giving courage to give feedback is not about "correcting" someone.

Courage to give feedback means taking responsibility for the impact — together.

Takeaway inspiration

Feedback

Courage to give feedback means speaking the clear truth respectfully and not downplaying its impact. It protects people and performance because it enables development before damage becomes entrenched.

When you have to give difficult feedback, approach it with three building blocks: observation – impact – clear expectations. And maintain rapport by not belittling the person, but also by not sugarcoating the issue.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT FEEDBACK

1. What feedback am I currently avoiding, even though I already feel its effects?
2. What do I fear more: the conflict now – or the escalation later?
3. How can I speak the truth in a way that enables development instead of reinforcing resistance?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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