

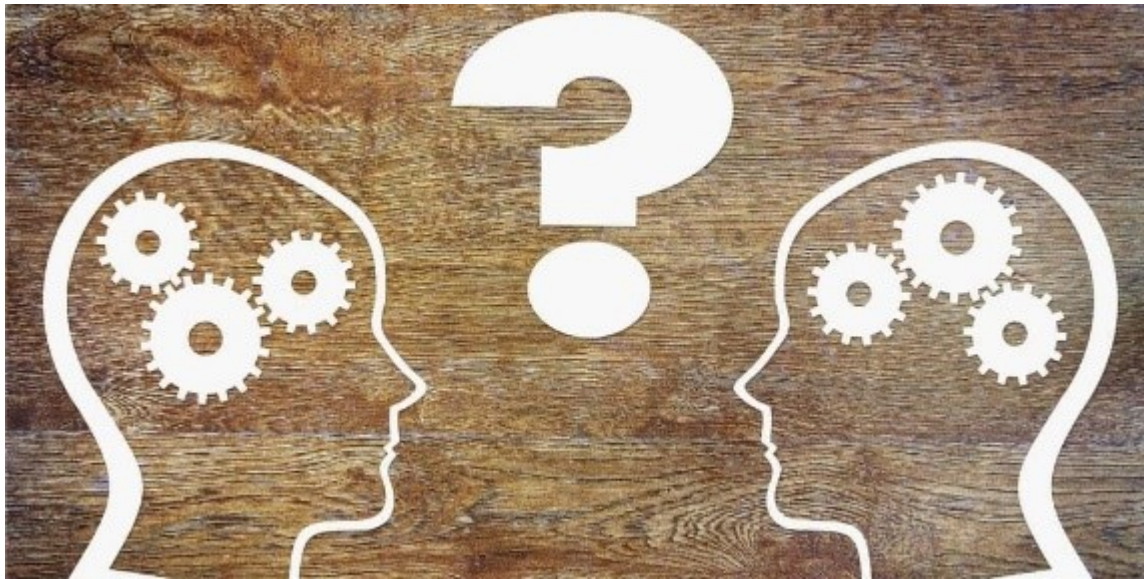


Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Managing Community and Economic Development Staff

By CED Guest Author

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/managing-community-and-economic-development-staff/>

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This is part of a series of posts on the topic of leadership and management as applied to community and economic development, authored by UNC School of Government faculty member Willow Jacobson.

Community and economic development (CED) professionals are often responsible for managing and coordinating the efforts of sizable staffs, including planners, code enforcement officials, grant administrators, and more. It's a good idea for CED managers to check in with their employees both to give and get feedback—and this post discusses effective ways to do that.

I was recently listening to a county manager talking about his go to “magic six questions” when he has a chance to talk with an employee. These are questions he has ready, not just for formal performance appraisals discussion, but if he finds himself in a setting with time to talk to one of the members of the county workforce. His six questions are:

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are you going?
3. What do you do best & how much time do you get to work on it?
4. If you were your own coach, what would you be working on?
5. How can I help you with that?
6. Do you have any feedback for me?

The first two questions push employees to think more broadly about where the organization is going and where the employee sees themselves heading. These questions tap into two important aspects. First, it forces employees to be forward looking—a practice that followers look for in effective leaders (Kouzes and Posner) and it is a means to help individuals begin acting with a broader and longer-term perspective. Second, these conversations can help individuals connect to the purpose and meaning of the organization, as well as how the work of someone within the organization fits



with that purpose. Just as you create long range plans for the community, what are the long range plans for the department, and what does the employee see as their long range plan for their career? A conversation about this topic allows you to have a chance to both hear from employees and share with them your perspective of where things are headed and why. You may find mutual concerns, hopes, and perspectives or may find that it is a time to clear up misperceptions.

Question three raises an interesting chance for reflection on what one does best; this in itself is an important question. I challenge the reader to consider how you would answer this question. What is the thing that you believe you do best, do those around you even know that is what you think of as your strength? It can be amazing to hear your answer in comparison to how others might answer it for you. This might push us to think about if we're structuring work to allow individuals to be in their place of most possibility the most often. Are there unspoken strengths we can tap into that we didn't know about because we never asked?

Self-knowledge and self-reflection are important development skills for all employees, managers, and leaders and while all these questions push one to reflect, the fourth question puts this skill to the test. It is remarkable how often someone really knows what they should be working on or where they need help if given the time and space to consider this question. Sometimes admitting the answer is not easy but often the answer is within the employee if they are willing to push themselves. Is the organizational culture one in which the employee feels that they can answer this question truthfully without fear of retribution or criticism? Is there support available in terms of training and development if the answer leads the employee in that direction?

While these top four questions set the stage for a great conversation between a manager, at any level, and an employee they also make great reflective questions to ask oneself and consider what are possible actions needed based on how those answers.

Asking for feedback is not an easy task and the last two questions push the asker to step up and be open for feedback as well. Kouzes and Posner, in their work on exemplary leadership behaviors, highlights the importance and challenge of asking for feedback on how one's actions affect other people's performance (Kouzes and Posner). Engaging in this behavior with more frequency has been found to correlate with individuals being seen as better leaders. Despite positive outcomes from this practice, it is not easy to engage in and makes people feel vulnerable. Still, for those bold enough to do so the answers can be surprising and empowering for those asking and those answering.

A recent poll reported that 16.3% of employees said their manager was horrible at soliciting feedback on their employee experience and 40% rated them okay – they ask for feedback only once or twice a year (Achievers). Employees who feel their voice is heard at work are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work (Salesforce.com). At the same time nearly 50% of employees said they don't feel comfortable raising issues with their managers between formal reviews, but that they would be more proactive about doing so (75%) if managers gave them more frequent feedback (Reflektive). Having these questions ready to engage employees with is an opportunity to start meaningful and rich feedback conversations as well as provide us all a chance to reflect on our work, what we do, and want from our work.