Giving Feedback
By Peter Taylor

The other day I was in town and a major sweet manufacturer was handing out samples of their new product, free and with no ongoing commitment, and so it was proving very popular with the shoppers.

Now it was a sweet that I did like but it was one of those special limited edition variants to the standard offering. Personally it wasn't to my taste, the kids loved it, but for me it just didn't work and so that was that. I didn't ask for my money back (it was free) and I didn't go and tell them I didn't like it (I just won't buy any of that flavour, although the original is still as good as ever) and I certainly didn't go and complain to the manufacturers about their product.Now I am going to go on about book reviews here (again) so you have been warned.

There is a trend amongst publishers, and authors are implicit in this of course, to produce free eBooks. These books are either a free complete book given away in order to hopefully attract new readers to an author for their other books, or a sample of a book (or two) put together to do the same thing, attract in readers who might then buy the full book at a price of course. I recently reading 'The Tiny Fork Diet' by Alan Sugar which is a promo for his 'The way I see it' book, and I also downloaded Karren Brady's '10 Rules for Success', in turn a promo for her book 'Strong Woman'. Neither was great but I did buy Alan Sugar's book afterwards.

I continue to enjoy the experience of being an author, eight books now and three more in production, but the whole 'being in the public domain' and 'being open to direct feedback' is still a tough one.

Now I have a free eBook called 'The Art of Laziness' and it is a sampler, a freebie to get you hooked, it tries to sell my other books 'The Lazy Project Manager' and 'The Lazy Winner'. But in sections of these books and each chapter of each book I have written I would hope to offer some value to the reader (well I try anyway).

For all my books I get reviews, good and not so good – you can't please everyone of course. But for 'The Art of Laziness' with some 10,000 downloads around the world I seem to only get bad reviews. Actually when I think of it I would not ever expect a good review as this is just a sampler of a fuller piece of work, this is the work that should be judged. The most recent one was *'A complete waste of time'* – you have been told, do not download this free book – it went on *'An exercise in stating the obvious as an apparent advert for his other books. I was hoping to learn something from this, but just wasted my valuable time reading it'*.

Why do I care, especially as my books sell in the thousands around the world, well it is the cold bluntness of the feedback that stings I guess and the inability to respond in any real manner. I politely read all reviews and I politely thank people for taking the time to post a review and that is that. No chance for a good old conversation about what I was trying to achieve and learn more about why the reader was disappointed.

Actually to be fair on two occasions the reviewer has come back and we have chatted about the book and on one occasion the reviewer upgraded the review by a star or two.

On this occasion I was amused that I got two stars for a book that was 'a waste of time', could have been worse.There may be times when you have to talk to someone in your team about something that they have done, or not done, that has caused the project problems. You will have to give them feedback.

Giving and receiving feedback, no matter how well intentioned the feedback is, can be a tough process. So how do you go about it? Starting with the basics then make sure such feedback is:
- Done in private
- Is honest and respectful
- Non-judgmental
- Provided in simple terms
- Provided in manageable sized portions
- Is relevant and appropriate at the time

Begin by setting the scene and providing some insight by explaining the problem, the consequences, and perhaps suggesting an alternative behaviour that would be better for the future.
Always address the problem and not the person.

Try to make your feedback a joint analysis of the problem which is typically much easier for the recipient to accept.

In my case the chocolate bar was not to my taste but the only investment I have made was in eating some of it and then throwing it away, I had no feedback to give (maybe the company would have liked some, I'm not sure). In the case of the book reviews well the investment was not one of cost, the book was free, but yes there was the investment in reading time to account for.

But looking at the list of basic rules for feedback you can see why this doesn't work with such book reviews:
- Done in private – book reviews are done in the full glare of the public domain
- Is honest and respectful – generally this is true
- Non-judgmental – definitely not, many are judgmental, in fact the more that they dislike the book the more judgmental they get it seems
- Provided in simple terms – sometime yes, there is always the one to five star measurement but the supporting words can be simple or complex
- Provided in manageable sized portions – true, one book, one review
- Is relevant and appropriate at the time – well yes true in a fashion but I still get book reviews years after the book was published, after all not everyone reads it the day it is released, and they just come at you out of the blue with no warning

And it is almost impossible to take the review in an objective way; it is your book and therefore anyone who doesn't like it can't like you, the author. So it is personal.

Feedback is hard but essential for us all to improve.

I recently got a free coffee. I had collected those loyalty stamps and after buying 5 coffees I was entitled to a free one. It was horrible but I was now in the car on driving down the motorway when I tasted the coffee. At first I thought, this was free so what, dump it and forget it, but then I thought – feedback, I should give feedback to help the coffee company improve their product service and so I did. When I got home I found the website and submitted a comment.

After three days I received the reply *'We thank you for your comment about your recent experience with our coffee. We are sorry that you did not enjoy the product this time but appreciate that you are a regular customer and feel sure that your next experience will be back to our usual standard.'*

The difference?

Well I read my feedback and I care about what people say, it makes me feel good sometimes and it makes me feel bad sometimes, but I always care.

And the coffee company … well what do you think?

About Peter Taylor

Peter is a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in Project Management. His background is in project management and marketing across three major business areas over the last 26 years. He is also an accomplished communicator and leader and is also a professional speaker.

Peter is the author of '*The Lazy Project Manager'*, *The Lazy Winner'* and '*The Lazy Project Manager and the Project from Hell*' (Infinite Ideas), as well as *'Leading Successful PMOs'* (Gower) and '*Project Branding'* (Gower – late 2012). More information can be found at www.thelazyprojectmanager.com and www.leadingsuccessfulpmos.com and www.thelazywinner.com – and through his free podcasts in iTunes.