

# The Secret That Increases Effort 40%

By Tim Elmore, Growing Leaders, July 2014

Several years ago, I met with a university student, pondering how to provide some difficult feedback on a project he'd just finished. We'll call him Zach. Zach was a smart young man, but, like so many from Generation iY (the youngest Millennials), he was fragile when it came to taking constructive criticism. Zach is among the millions of kids who got awards just for playing sports, special marks just for completing a school project, praise for merely meeting minimum standards, and money just for being a part of his family. All of this has hindered him from being able to handle less than rave reviews from supervisors.

My meeting was no different.

As I ventured into the conversation, I began with positive remarks on his progress. I affirmed everything I could. As soon as I got honest about his unsatisfactory (even unacceptable) work, however, his entire demeanor changed. He bristled and began to defend his performance. Then, he actually turned on me. I became the enemy and he was the victim. He lashed out at me, and told me everyone else was on "his side" and believed in him. He actually reviewed the litany of awards he'd won in his past as if to convince himself he was special. (Interpretation: I was a lone critic, aggressor, and most certainly mistaken). In the end, I don't think he heard me. He was emotionally disabled from consuming helpful, corrective feedback.

## The Secret That Enabled Me to Improve

Every coach or teacher knows there's no moment more important than the one when feedback is delivered. Do it well, and the learner makes progress. Do it poorly, and the opposite happens. We assume the secret to effective feedback is the quality of the information we share: Do this, or don't do that, and you'll be better. But this may not be the case.

Daniel Coyle is a member of a team of psychologists from Stanford, Yale and Columbia who set out to explore this issue, and what they uncovered is that helpful feedback had far more to do with "how" than "what." They asked middle school teachers to give a writing assignment to their students, and afterward, give the students various types of feedback. To their surprise, the researchers discovered there was one particular type of remark that improved student effort so much, they called it "magical." Students who received this feedback chose to revise their paper far more often than students who did not—a 40 percent increase among white students and a 320 percent boost for black students. In the end, it improved their performances significantly.

What was that magical remark? Just one simple phrase:

"I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know you can reach them."

That's it. Nineteen simple words that carry weight because they communicate the exact opposite of what students hear when we critique them any other way. According to Dan Coyle, "they are a signal that creates something powerful: a sense of belonging and connection."

When we examine them closely, the phrase contains several distinct signals:

1. You are part of this group or team.
2. This team is special; we have high standards here.
3. I believe you can reach those standards.

The secret is to understand that this feedback isn't just feedback. It's a vital cue about the relationship. The reason it works so well is about how our brains are wired. It's normal to become guarded when attacked. Our effort is very personal, and we naturally want to defend it. When we receive authentic, clear signals of trust, belonging and expectation, however, the floodgates open. Feedback offered this way pulls the student toward you rather than repelling them. It's the difference between saying: "What's wrong with you?" and "You're better than this."

## My Suggestions for You

Today's adults have raised a fragile generation. Constant praise and rewards that are not connected to reality have actually hindered their maturation. This kind of research enables coaches or teachers to move the needle and enable them to grow. Kids are capable of so much more than they're currently showing us—because we set the bar low. Consider these "takeaways" as action steps of this research:

- Build a connection first. Insure your students know you believe in them.
- Spotlight the team and it's special persona and characteristics.
- Communicate expectations up front and remind students of them.
- Relay to each individual that they belong on this team; they're worthy.
- Don't soft pedal high standards. Don't pretend it's easy.
- Embrace the challenge with your students. Show them you're up for the challenge of meeting those standards too.

If we treat kids as fragile, they will most assuredly become fragile adults. But if we communicate they're worthy of high standards, they will rise to the occasion.