Receptive Leadership: Engage, Listen, Adjust, Repeat

Dan Ireland, Master of Arts Candidate
Human Dimensions of Organizations, The University of Texas at Austin

Introduction
In 2012, during an exit interview a senior manager asked me two questions: “How am I doing?” and “what can I do better?” I spoke truth to power and it was a constructive discussion because that manager was a receptive leader. Not all leaders and organizations create opportunities for upward feedback and even fewer use it constructively.

The Problem:
“Long-held assumptions about corporate communication and hierarchy are breaking down.” (Turco, 2016)

Technology has democratized communication in organizations big and small across the globe.

Organizations need to re-think communication systems and practices, specifically the upward flow of information and feedback through management structures.

Receptive leadership is the management practice of proactively seeking upward feedback and using it to affect positive change in organizations.

Methods
I used literature review and meta-analysis to analyze and define the nature of a receptive leader. This included findings from social science research, general lessons from HDO, and individual reflection from past experience.

I then explored my results through creating an individual- and an organizational-model of receptive leadership.

Discussion and Results

The Landscape (Theories, Terms, and Research):
• Judgement Heuristics and Cognitive Biases.
• Organizational Frameworks – Communication in Systems.
• Upward Feedback Through the Lens of Transactional Cost Economics.
• Personality Dimensions and Maturity Requisite of Receptive Leadership.
• Parrhesia – Speaking freely or candidly.
• Social Science Research Related to Upward Feedback.
• Expectancy Theory, Leader-Member Exchange Theory, Social Exchange Theory.
• Connections with Downward Feedback, Safety, Transformational Leadership, and Extrarole Behavior.

A Individual Model of Receptive Leadership:
1. Maintain a growth mindset
2. Engage the team when making decisions – avoid cognitive traps.
3. Foster Virtue and trust – Maintain strong rapport. Facilitate healthy, constructive interactions.
4. Ask for feedback often and do it in a predictable manner.
5. Use it: “When was the last time you allowed a subordinate to change your mind?”

An Organizational Model of Receptive Leadership:
1. Avoid “set-it and forget-it” feedback programs. Introduce programs thoroughly by explaining the context in-person rather than through mass email.
2. Cascade communications throughout implementation. Close-out by sharing findings.
3. Enable feedback forums that work – create multiple venues for feedback, whether they be digital or in-person, anonymous or open, in group settings or 1x1.

Conclusions

Tenets of Receptive Leadership:
1. Engage – Implement a growth mindset. Create a proactive and predictable forum for reciprocal feedback.
2. Listen – Empathize and actively listen. Avoid bias and never retaliate against productive critical feedback.
3. Adjust – Use what you’ve learned to improve yourself and the organization.
4. Repeat – Receptive Leadership is a marathon not a sprint, iterate and make small improvements every day.

Future Directions:
1. Learning & Development Course:
   a. 3 hour in-person course.
   b. Offered 1x a quarter initially, scale if demand is high.
   c. 1.5 hour online course through Dell’s MyLearning Portal (as an alternate to the in-person option).
2. Conduct a Longitudinal Study that could then be developed into a field guide on Receptive Leadership (and published).

Further Information
Feedback and continued discussion is encouraged! Feel free to reach out anytime.

Personal email: direland167@gmail.com
Work email: dan.ireland@dei.com

Acknowledgments
First and foremost I would like to thank my wife, Samantha, and son Theodore for their unwavering support during this journey.
Next, I would also like to thank my advisor, Ken-Hou Lin, second reader, Paul Woodruff, and all of the HDO faculty and staff for all of their support.
Last but not least, I would like to thank my cohort for making the past fifteen months a transformational experience.


Human Dimensions of Organizations | hdo.utexas.edu

Human Dimensions of Organizations | Innovation Comes Standard