

30

Courageous Love

The gift of blind spot feedback

I was a college lecturer, about two years into the post. I loved the job, and felt I was pretty good at it....

Students had to complete assignments, which I marked. I knew students had usually put a lot of work into these, so in turn I always offered extensive comments in



“I thought I should say something – because, if you don’t know, how will you find out?”

notes at the back of their essays. I also offered 'surgery times' - 15 minute slots where they could discuss their essays with me. Almost no one used these slots, which I put down to the fact I'd already given extensive feedback in my notes.

Then one day, a student booked to see me. She was a good, conscientious student. I knew her well. She was not only one of my personal tutees, but also a student on three courses I taught. I was

also the course leader. I looked up her grade - it was a B: a good mark, and as she was a good and conscientious student, I was keen to get her to the next grade, an A, if I could. So I was quite looking forward to our meeting.

As she arrived, she looked a little sombre. I asked if everything was OK, and she nodded. So I began by telling her I was pleased with her assignment...

She looked up, and said:

“So was I – until I read your comments. Then I thought there must be a mistake with the grade. So I’ve come to check whether you meant to put a ‘D’ rather than a ‘B’”.

I was shocked.

“Of course not – it was really good. Why do you say that?”

“Because, when I read your extensive, four pages of comments, they were all about what was wrong with the essay. There was nothing that was right. I couldn’t see

how it had got the mark you’d given it.”

That answer changed my life. I had the cold, cold flush of a truth realised, followed by the hot flush of embarrassment. I knew two things in that instant. One, that I had been making an appalling mistake as a teacher, and two, that I would change that, forever.

In my desire to ‘help’ students to improve, I’d entirely focused on their gaps – the things they hadn’t

done, or had left out, or the mistakes they'd made. I'd said nothing about what was good, what gave it the grade it got. Nothing! I assumed they would know that. No wonder people didn't book for surgery time...if they'd been given such a hard time on paper, why would they put themselves through 15 minutes of the same?

I told the student all of this, and that I was truly grateful for her comments. More than that, I admired her courage in offering a criticism to

someone who, from her perspective, had a significant say on her outcomes on this course. I told her this, too. She then said something that also had a profound impact on my life.

“You've taught and tutored me for three years, Arnie, and I think you are a good teacher. You're always on our side, and you care. That's why I couldn't believe you would intentionally be so one sided, so critical. You mustn't be able to see the

effect these comments have. So I thought I should say something – because, if you don't know, how will you get to find out?"

This was the single most important piece of feedback I've ever had in my life. I don't use the word 'grateful' a lot, but I was truly grateful for her courage and time that day.

Lessons learned:

- Don't assume: don't take it for granted that people

know what they do well - tell them.

- Acknowledge, praise, confirm what's good – about what they do, and how they are
- Start with that – so people are more receptive to listening to how they might do better
- Recognise that constructive, caring and careful feedback is the greatest gift that can be given

- Recognise that we depend on the courage of others to help us see what we cannot see in ourselves
- Understand that what distinguishes loving feedback from nasty feedback is intent
- That, by definition, any blind spot cannot be self-rectifying

I immediately changed. I started all feedback with what had got people to that mark. Only then did I

suggest how it could be improved. And guess what – students started to come to the surgeries...

I'm pretty sure I'd not be doing what I'm doing today, had it not been for that special student, with the gift of courageous love.

I was grateful then, and I'm grateful now, 30 years later.

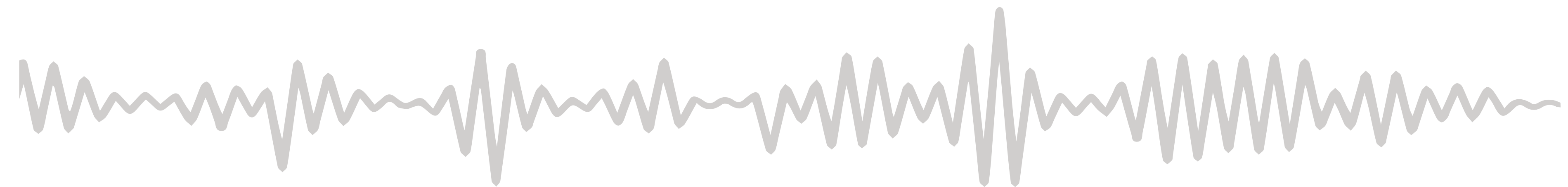
“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (R. Kipling)

The Effective storytelling series has one mission: to connect life to learning, in an entertaining way.

Visit effectivelearning.co.uk/storytelling for the full collection, covering >50 management and personal development topics.



Prefer to listen?



... subscribe to the ‘effective storytelling’ podcast, and we’ll read them to you.

effective
storytelling

