

WE CAN CHANGE THE FUTURE.

WE CAN'T CHANGE THE PAST.

TRY FEEDFORWARD INSTEAD OF FEEDBACK

PROVIDING FEEDBACK HAS LONG been considered a necessary activity of leaders. As they strive to achieve the goals of the organization, their employees need to know how they are doing. They need to know if their performance is in line with what their leaders expect. They need to learn what they have done well and what they need to change. Traditionally, this information has been communicated in the form of “downward feedback” from leaders to their employees. Just as employees need feedback from leaders, leaders can benefit from feedback from their employees. Employees can provide useful input on the effectiveness of procedures and processes, as well as input to managers on their leadership effectiveness.

But a fundamental problem exists with all types of feedback: It focuses on the past, on what has already occurred, not on the infinite variety of opportunities that can happen in the future. As such, feedback can be limited and static rather than expansive and dynamic.

ELEVEN REASONS TO TRY FEEDFORWARD

These 11 reasons demonstrate why feedforward can often be more useful than feedback as a developmental tool.

1 We can change the future; we can't change the past. Feedforward helps people envision and focus on a positive future, not a failed past. Athletes are often trained using feedforward: Race car drivers are taught to look at the road ahead, not at the wall; basketball players are taught to

envision the ball going in the hoop and to imagine the perfect shot. By giving people ideas on how they can be even more successful, we can increase their chances of achieving this success in the future.

2 It can be more productive to help people be right than prove they were wrong.

Negative feedback often becomes an exercise in “let me prove you were wrong”. This tends to produce defensiveness on the part of the receiver and discomfort on the part of the sender. Even constructively delivered feedback is often seen as negative, as it necessarily involves a discussion of mistakes, shortfalls, and problems. Feedforward, on the other hand, is almost always seen as positive because it focuses on solutions, not problems.



3 Feedforward is especially suited to successful people. Successful people like getting ideas that are aimed at helping them achieve their goals. They tend to resist negative judgment. We all tend to accept feedback that is consistent with the way we see ourselves. We also tend to reject or deny feedback that is inconsistent with the way we see ourselves. Successful people tend to have a very positive self-image. Many successful executives respond to (and even enjoy) feedforward.

4 Feedforward can come from anyone who knows about the task. It does not require personal experience with the individual. People can learn a great deal from people they don't know. For example, if you want to be a better listener, almost any

fellow leader can give you ideas on how you can improve; they don't have to know you. Feedback requires knowing about the person. Feedforward just requires having good ideas for achieving the task.

5 People do not take feedforward as personally as feedback. In theory, constructive feedback is supposed to focus on the performance, not the person. In practice, almost all feedback is taken personally, no matter how it is delivered. Successful people's sense of identity is highly connected with their work. The more successful a person is, the more this tends to be true. It is hard to give a dedicated professional feedback that is not taken personally. Feedforward cannot involve a personal critique, since it is discussing something that has not yet

happened! Positive suggestions tend to be seen as objective advice; personal critiques are often viewed as personal attacks.

6 Feedback can reinforce stereotyping and negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Feedforward can reinforce the possibility of change. Feedback can reinforce the feeling of failure. How many of us have been "helped" by a spouse, significant other, or friend, who seems to have a near-photographic memory of our previous "sins" which they share with us to point out the history of our shortcomings. Negative feedback can be used to reinforce the message: "This is just the way you are." Feedforward is based on the assumption that the receiver of suggestions can make positive changes in the future.

FEEDFORWARD CAN REINFORCE THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE.

7 Most of us hate getting negative feedback, and we don't like to give it. In a review of 360-degree feedback summary reports for over 50 companies, the items “provides developmental feedback in a timely manner” and “encourages and accepts constructive criticism” almost always score near the bottom on co-worker satisfaction with leaders. Traditional training does not seem to make a great deal of difference. If leaders got better at providing feedback every time the performance appraisal forms were “improved”, most should be perfect by now! Leaders are not very good at giving or receiving negative feedback. It is unlikely that this will change in the near future.

8 Feedforward can cover almost all of the same material as feedback. Imagine that you have just made a terrible presentation in front of the executive committee. Your manager is in the room. Rather than make you “relive” this humiliating experience, your manager might help you prepare for future presentations by giving you suggestions for the future. These suggestions can be very specific and still delivered in a positive way. In this way, your manager can cover the same points without feeling embarrassed and without making you feel even more humiliated.

9 Feedforward tends to be much faster and more efficient than feedback. An excellent technique for giving ideas to successful people is to say, “Here are four ideas for the future. Please accept these in

the positive spirit that they are given. If you can use only two of the ideas, you are still two ahead. Just ignore what doesn't make sense for you.” With this approach, almost no time gets wasted on judging the quality of the ideas or “proving that the ideas are wrong”. “Debate” time is usually negative, can take up a lot of time, and is often not very productive. By eliminating judgment of the ideas, the process becomes much more positive for the sender, as well as the receiver. Successful people tend to have a high need for self-determination and to accept ideas that they buy while rejecting ideas that feel forced on them.

10 Feedforward can be used with managers, and team members. Rightly or wrongly, feedback is associated with judgment. This can lead to very negative, or even career limiting, unintended consequences when applied to managers or peers. Feedforward does not imply superiority of judgment. It focuses more on being a helpful “fellow traveller” than an expert. As such, it can be easier to hear from a person who is not in a position of power or authority. An excellent team building exercise is to have each team member ask, “How can I better help our team in the future?”, and listen to feedforward from fellow team members.

11 People are more attentive to feedforward than feedback. When you don't have to come up with clever responses, other than “thank you”, you can focus all your energy on listening to what the person has to say.

In summary, the intent of this article is not to imply that leaders should never give feedback or that performance appraisals should be abandoned. The intent is to show how feedforward is often preferable to feedback in day-to-day interactions. Aside from its effectiveness and efficiency, feedforward can make life a lot more enjoyable. When managers are asked, “How did you feel the last time you received feedback?”, their most common responses are very negative. When managers are asked how they felt after receiving feedforward, they reply that feedforward was not only useful, it was also fun!

Quality communication between people at all levels and every department and division is the glue that holds organizations together. By using feedforward and by encouraging others to use it, leaders can dramatically improve the quality of communication in their organizations, ensuring that the right message is conveyed and that those who receive it are receptive to its content. The result is a much more dynamic, much more open organization, one whose employees focus on the promise of the future rather than dwelling on the mistakes of the past.

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