

# Feedback: an opportunity to strengthen relationships

Feedback is arguably one of the most effective tools that leaders have for developing their teams. If you are committed to helping to develop the people around you, and if you want to continue your professional growth, mastering the use of feedback is vital. This article is about how to use feedback for that purpose.

## The source of feedback

As Professor Otto Scharmer<sup>1</sup> says, the most important thing in leadership is where the leader is coming from. So before starting with the what, how, when or why you should give or receive feedback, ask yourself:

- What is my relationship with “providing feedback”?  
Do you love it? Do you avoid it? Is it hard for you? Are you afraid of hurting?
- What is my relationship with “receiving feedback”?  
Do you encourage it? Are you open? Does it make you feel insecure? Do you think people do it just to bother you?

As a leader, you must be conscious of your own relationship with providing and receiving feedback. Once you're aware of it, you can choose to keep it or upgrade it. Our first tip: Be honest with yourself.

We suggest approaching feedback as an opportunity to build trust and connection with other people. Whether you receive or provide it, positive or negative, our invitation for you is to approach any “feedback experience” as a possibility to build trust and connection with others and an opportunity to learn and grow.

## Why is feedback important?

The objective of feedback is to reduce the blind spots that every person has. A blind spot is an area unknown to the person but known to the rest of us. Feedback, when properly used, is a key tool for increasing awareness, and it creates a space for improvement and growth.

Remember that your team's growth is limited by your own. Thus, it is a two-sided process: if you are not getting feedback, then the quality of the feedback you provide will be limited. Actively solicit feedback and create an environment where feedback is welcomed.

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<sup>1</sup> Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges (2007) <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/index.shtml>

## Key distinctions for feedback

### Positive and negative feedback

- Positive feedback (e.g. you structured the report very well) increases commitment by enhancing both the experience and the person's confidence.
- Negative feedback (e.g. you misspelled their names), on the other hand, identifies where the person needs to put in effort, and offers insight into how he or she might improve.

Dr Matthew White<sup>2</sup> put it like this: "Positive feedback is like the wind in your sails. Corrective feedback is like a rudder to keep us on course."

### Level of feedback

According to John Hattie and Helen Timperley from the University of Auckland<sup>3</sup> there are four levels of feedback:

1. **About a task or product.** This level of feedback may include directions to acquire more, different, or correct information, such as "You need to include more information about the Water Framework Directive".
2. **About the process used to create a product or complete a task.** This kind of feedback is more directly aimed at the processing of information, or processes requiring understanding or completing the task. For example, "This position paper may make more sense if you use the strategies we talked about earlier".
3. **About self-regulation,** which involves interplay between commitment, control, and confidence. For example, "I acknowledge that you don't like this kind of task, but last time you did it pretty well. I expect the same this time." Feedback such as this can have a major influence on self-efficacy, self-regulatory proficiencies, and self-beliefs, such that the person is encouraged or informed how to better and more effortlessly continue on the task.
4. **About the person,** which is often unrelated to performance on the task. Examples of such feedback include "You are a great team member" and "That's excellent input, well done."

The objective of being aware of these distinctions is to tailor your feedback for the best impact. Improving your leadership requires you to be more effective in your interactions and tailoring your feedback correctly will prove beneficial in this regard.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Matthew White, of Teach For Australia, speaking on Positive Psychology, at the Australian Association of Graduate Employers conference, 2010

<sup>3</sup> The Power of Feedback. Review of Educational Research. March 2007, Vol. 77, No. 1, pp. 81–112.  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/staff/development/performance/resources/readings/power-feedback.pdf>

## **Providing feedback**

Next time you are thinking of providing feedback to your colleagues, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where am I coming from? Is it from my anger, disappointment, satisfaction, or from my desire to build trust and connection with the other person? Am I judging him or her? Am I making the other person wrong?
- Is the context set? Have I asked the person for specific time for this? Is the other person focused and present to my feedback? Am I able to invest the proper amount of time? Do we have a convenient place? (Be aware that your office is your area of control, and her office is her area of control, while a meeting room or another shared space are neutral grounds).
- Do I know what kind of feedback am I going to provide?
- Do I have supportive facts from the past that can serve as an example?
- Do I have a proposal for the future?
- Am I willing to ask the other person's perspective and integrate it in the solution?
- What is the outcome I want to have after providing the feedback? For example, the relationship will be tightened, there will be no more "distance" between you, the person will be motivated to do a better job next time, the person will understand fully what is expected from him or her in the future, etc.

Answering these questions will help you to increase the effectiveness of your feedback, while at the same time creating a win-win relationship and an organisational culture based on trust. In the appendix you will find some more practical guidelines on how to provide feedback.

## **Receiving feedback**

As a leader in your organisation, receiving feedback is key. First, it is the easiest way to learn about your opportunities to grow by illuminating your blind spots. Second, by actively seeking it you will create a culture of mutual learning, trust and openness in your organisation. Third, it is a direct way to learn about what is happening with your staff and their relationship with you.

### ***Sources for growth***

You can ask for feedback from different sources. We advise you to have a 360° perspective and reach out to your employees, your board members, your partners, your beneficiaries, etc. A personal coach can be a valuable source of feedback, too. In addition, a coach can also solicit 360° feedback on your behalf and offer input from different sources in a more organised and valuable way (as it's more likely that other parties will tell a coach more than they would tell you directly).

Remember that in leadership, the place where you are coming from is the most important thing. Therefore, chose to come from a place of trust creation and connection with the other person. Show genuine curiosity and even if you regard something as not true, be aware that it could be true from another perspective.

## **Key questions**

We invite you to ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I actively asking for feedback from all of my stakeholders?
- Who else could provide me with valuable input?
- How can I systematise getting valuable feedback for my development?
- How can I reach out to the people I want to get input from?

In addition, the next time you are in a situation where someone is giving you feedback, keep in mind the following questions:

- What kind of feedback am I getting?
- Is my focus on constructing trust and connection or is it on protecting myself? What would become possible if you suspended “self-protecting” for some time?
- Do I truly understand what the person is sharing with me? Am I genuinely curious?
- What would I need to ask to get more value out of this feedback?

And after the receiving feedback ask yourself:

- Is this feedback similar to some that I have received before? Who else could I ask to enrich my vision about this issue?
- From what has been shared, what resonates with me? What things touched me? Why?
- Am I taking action already on these issues? Do I want to take action on them? What action would be appropriate?
- If I don't want to take action, why is that so? Am I resisting something? Do I think I'm in the right about something?
- Have I let go of the comments that are not serving my development? Decide to let go of them.

## **Conclusion**

Feedback is one of the most powerful tools for developing your leadership, your team and your organisation, but at the same time, it is one of the most under- and misused ones.

As a leader, inProgress invites you to take responsibility for creating an environment of trust and connection in your workplace. Lead by example, asking for regular feedback from all your stakeholders and providing powerful and useful feedback to your colleagues.

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# Appendix

## Practical Guidelines for giving and receiving feedback

1. Acknowledge the potential discomfort of the situation.
2. Focus on observable behaviour rather than inferred personality attributes. People may do things that seem stupid but labelling a person as stupid is counter-productive.
3. Discuss the likely or possible consequences of continuing or changing actions.
4. Keep a sense of proportion. Feedback is just information; don't make it into a crisis.

## Guidelines for providing feedback

1. Clarity. Be clear about what you want to say.
2. If it's negative feedback, start by acknowledging something positive.
3. Don't judge. For example, "when I see a lot of paper on your desk (observation) / when I see your chaotic desk (judgment)". Avoid using adjectives. I feel unappreciated (a judgement), I feel annoyed (a feeling). You should avoid things like "you have been lazy, unmotivated, and inefficient" because you are judging the person. Instead talk about what you have observed or how you feel.
4. Refer to behaviour that can be changed.
5. Be descriptive rather than evaluative.
6. Own the feedback: use 'I' statements. Do not use "we" or "us"
7. Be very careful with advice. People rarely struggle with an issue because of the lack of some specific piece of information; often, the best help is to aid the person with coming to a better understanding of their issue, how it developed, and how they can identify actions that will address the issue more effectively.
8. Avoid generalisations and vague or ambiguous descriptions. Offer specific examples: "you don't think strategically enough" is less helpful than "there are several major issues that you overlooked in your analysis".
9. Acknowledge emotional responses and allow ventilation, but don't get side-tracked. Keep the communication goal-oriented; the purpose of feedback is to reflect on what happened in the past in order to improve actions in the future.
10. Address only actions that are within a person's control and which encourage them to take responsibility. For example, failure to complete a project on time because suppliers missed deadlines could be due to unforeseeable external factors, or it could be a result of poor project management.
11. Develop improvement strategies. Ideally, you can elicit these during the discussion and provide suggestions when needed.
12. Ensure that a plan of action is agreed upon and follow-up to review results. Acknowledge success and further adjustments needed.

## Guidelines for receiving Feedback

1. Recognise the value of feedback - when you don't know what you don't know you can't learn.
2. Seek feedback.
3. Ask for feedback regularly from a variety of sources. It's hard to see your own shortcomings, but if you ask many people will be more than willing to tell you about them. The objective is growth, so if you keep an open mind you will start welcoming ideas and suggestions for improvement. If you feel bombarded with negatives, don't be shy about asking for some positive feedback as well.
4. Be specific on the issues or domains you want to get input about.
5. Accept your emotions but avoid overreacting and defer overt responses.
6. Be conscious about the distinctions that we have presented.

7. For instance, negative and positive feedback serve different purposes; feedback on self-regulation could be useful from the board members, while personal and process feedback could be more valuable from the people who report directly to you.
8. Obtain specific instances. Ask why an action was problematic. Seek examples of alternative ways of handling the situation. Avoid defensive behaviour such as denial, rationalisation or blaming others. Excuses ease the pain but they are also disempowering and can lead to feelings of victimisation and helplessness.
9. Discuss strategies that will enable you to achieve the desired outcomes. Think about the resources, support or coaching you may need and work out a plan to get it.
10. Act on your plan and provide feedback about the results to anyone considerate enough to have provided input.
11. Remember, someone once said: "There's no such thing as mistakes – only learning opportunities".
12. Avoid debates.
13. Feedback sessions are best viewed as a partnership for improvement. When you allow defensiveness to enter the conversation then you aren't open to hearing what the other person is saying. You are too busy trying to justify yourself and prove why what the person is saying is wrong or won't work. Accept feedback for what it is – an attempt to help you improve your skills and develop personally and professionally.
14. Listen actively.
15. Paraphrase what is being said and make sure you are clear about the behaviour that needs to be improved and any goals you set to bring that about. This helps prevent misunderstandings. Probe for details and try not to interrupt. Participate actively in the suggested steps for improvement.
16. Ask for examples, not explanations.
17. You need to be really clear about what you are doing that is not working. Take notes if you need to. The better you understand exactly what you are doing "wrong", the easier it will be to formulate a plan to change it.
18. If you receive feedback that you don't know how to take action on (for example, if you're accused of being "arrogant" or "unprofessional") ask people to zoom in on precisely the behaviour they want to see changed. Otherwise there's nothing you can do about it other than worry.
19. Don't obsess.
20. Accept the feedback for what it is. Some of it you may agree with and some you may not. Take what you need from the comments and begin addressing what you can. There is no need to feel insulted or to go over and over the scene in your head. Recognise the positive intentions, even when the message is not delivered expertly, and seize the opportunity to learn more about yourself and to improve.
21. Process the feedback in your own time.
22. Take time to evaluate the message and decide how you are going to apply it. If that means taking a day or two before putting an action plan in place, that's OK. Put your energy into understanding rather than fixing.
23. In the end, how you respond to feedback is up to you. Not everything that is suggested to you will be appropriate or actionable. Ultimately you are the only one who can improve your performance and part of that responsibility is choosing what to work on. Being open to the comments and feedback given to you will only help you get a more robust picture of your current performance, giving you more options from which to develop your improvement plan.

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