

Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback

Participants are then asked why this exercise is seen as fun and helpful as opposed to painful, embarrassing or uncomfortable. Their answers provide a great explanation of 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. Racecar 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. I have observed many successful executives respond to (and even enjoy) feedforward. I am not sure that these same people would have had such a positive reaction to feedback.

4. ***Feedforward can come from anyone who knows about the task. It does not require personal experience with the individual.*** One very common positive reaction to the previously described exercise is that participants are amazed by how much they can learn from people that 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 people are, 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 personal 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” that they share with us in order 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.

7. *Face it! Most of us hate getting negative feedback, and we don't like to give it.*

I have reviewed summary 360° feedback 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 only use 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”. This “debate” time is usually negative; it can take up a lot of time, and it 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 will tend to accept ideas that they “buy” while rejecting ideas that feel “forced” upon them.

10. *Feedforward can be a useful tool to apply with managers, peers 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 is more focused on being a helpful “fellow traveler” 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 (in one-on-one dialogues.)

11. **People tend to listen more attentively to feedforward than feedback.** One participant in the *feedforward* exercise noted, “I think that I listened more effectively in this exercise than I ever do at work!” When asked why, he responded, “Normally, when others are speaking, I am so busy *composing* a reply that will make sure that I sound smart – that I am not fully *listening* to what the other person is saying. In *feedforward* the only reply that I am allowed to make is ‘thank you’. Since I don’t have to worry about composing a clever reply – I can focus all of my energy on listening to the other person!”

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* can often be 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 and among 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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