



Two Leadership Competencies: Feedback and Feedforward

by Brian McDonald, Founder, MOR Associates, January 2024

Leaders influence the growth and development of their staff. They choose assignments, assemble teams, and provide direction. Two other significant responsibilities are to provide feedback and feedforward.

Feedback refers to sharing observations about behaviors that have happened or are happening, and feedforward refers to anticipating future growth opportunities. In both cases, the goal is to provide individuals with information helps guide their development. The key difference between the two is time.

Despite the difference in time frames, there is considerable overlap. Both must be delivered with clarity and sensitivity, and animated by a desire to help the individual achieve focused improvement.

Feedback

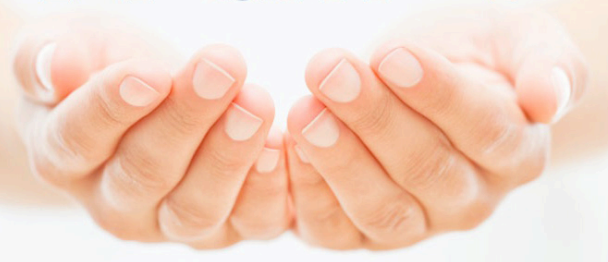
Information about reactions to a product or the effectiveness of a process or information pertaining to a person's performance used as the basis for improvement.

Whether a leader is offering feedback to a direct report or a workgroup, there are ways to share the feedback that can make the difference between a positive interaction and one that leaves an adverse residue.

Did you ever ask for feedback only to regret it because the advice was so general, "Yeah that was great," or so critical, "It was terrible," that there was little value in this exchange and maybe some harm done?

On the other hand, were you fortunate to have a mentor or someone interested in you who shared what they saw as your strengths or your potential? They saw something in you that maybe you didn't even see? In these interactions, the person offering the feedback was invested in your well-being and cared enough to offer something of value. **Feedback is a gift when it is done well.**

FEEDBACK IS A GIFT



MOR Associates has provided thousands of individuals with 360° feedback reports and numerous organizations with customer satisfaction survey data. The objective in each interaction is to offer the individual or the leader useful insights on what they are doing well along with what they could be doing differently or better.

It is important to learn how others view our leadership. As individual leaders, we may believe we understand how others perceive us, yet it is important to validate our self-assessment to see if it is aligned with reality and learn if there are different perceptions of our strengths or potential improvement opportunities.

It is also important for organizations to know how customers view their services.

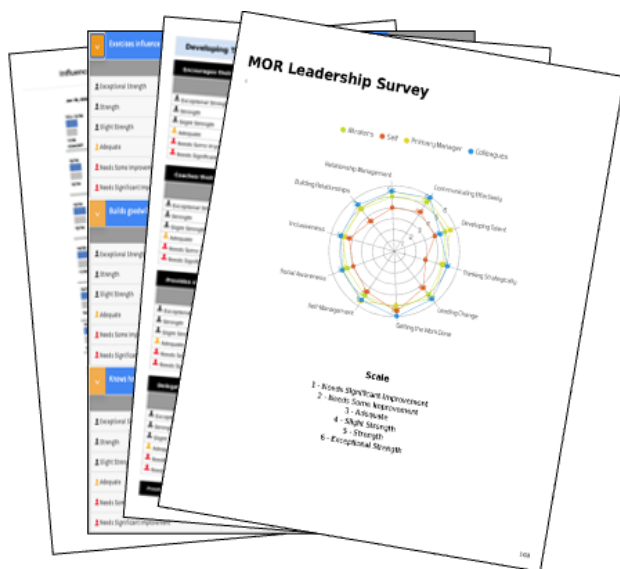
An organization may have data or metrics on the services it provides, yet stakeholders will gain some greater insight by listening to how different customers rate the various services.

Learning how to give and how to receive feedback is a valuable skill to master.

As a case in point, “Dana” was taking on increasingly important roles as they were promoted. Their scope and portfolio were expanding. They wanted to prove they could handle these additional responsibilities. Dana was working long hours and struggling to keep up with the expanded volume. Early on in their new role, they were invited to have a 360° review.

Although their 360° report identified strengths that were contributing to their success, the report also pointed out an Achilles heel. In earlier positions, Dana was considered one of the most productive managers. Yet what got them noticed for being productive in these prior roles no longer scaled. The report pointed out Dana wasn’t delegating and empowering others to get the work done. They were becoming a bottleneck.

This feedback gave Dana the opportunity to step back and reconsider what their role at this level entailed. They needed to focus more on leading and managing while getting better at delegating to their expanded team. Dana, for their own well-being and the well-being of the team, needed to learn to trust others to get the different tasks done. Hearing this feedback early on allowed for Dana to make a course correction before their ability to fulfill this role was questioned.



Leaders and managers may find it helpful to gather feedback on a number of different topics. Feedback can be helpful on any of the following:

- Reviewing the core work processes: How effective are they? Are there gaps?
- Asking how effective the standing meetings are: What are some pluses, deltas? What might we do to make the meetings more effective and efficient going forward? Reviewing a major ongoing project: How are we doing? What’s working? What are some concerns people have?
- Reviewing after a project has been completed by conducting an “after-action-review” to draw out lessons that can be applied to future projects: How are we doing as a team? What are we doing well? What could we improve regarding the way we work together as a team?
- Doing a periodic SWOT analysis focusing on different areas will help identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the team or the service.
- Sharing expectations can be a constructive exercise. The manager can share their expectations of the team along with what the team can expect from him. The team members can share their expectations of the manager as well as what the manager can expect of them. This exchange turns the unstated into explicit statements the parties can discuss.
- Soliciting customer feedback and reflecting on what you are hearing that could be improved.
- Reviewing the team’s metrics: How effective are the metrics? What is working regarding the team’s performance? What needs attention moving forward?
- Offering one on one feedback, pointing out something someone did well or something they could do differently or better. Offering feedback as positive reinforcement for a job done well or a behavior you want repeated is one way to leverage this skill.

Note only the last example focuses on giving interpersonal feedback. Workshop participants share their history that feedback is oftentimes experienced as critical or negative, and this perception discourages people from seeking or offering feedback.

Learning to give feedback and learning how to receive feedback are both essential skills for creating a healthy culture, a culture in which there is an openness, trust and willingness to look for ways to continuously improve.

Once individuals experience receiving feedback that is supportive and constructive, they readily ask for more.

The guidelines for giving feedback are straightforward: the wording, the delivery and timing are all important considerations and will influence the acceptance.

- Feedback is most useful when it is specific versus general.
- Feedback needs to be descriptive not evaluative.
- It is best when it is well-timed (the sooner the better).
- It is more effective when the one offering feedback owns the perspective (uses I statements).

A simple example would be “Chris” asking “Pat” about the meeting Chris had just run.

Pat was quick to say: “It was a waste of time as we didn’t get anywhere.”

If Pat had been following the guidelines, the exchange could have been more beneficial, “From my vantage point the meeting seemed to go around in circles. It would have been helpful to have had an agenda, a clear outcome, and a simple way to capture people’s ideas so we could develop a course of action.”

Given the actual feedback from Pat, Chris may have been reluctant to ask for other perspectives. As a result, Chris may not have gotten the insights needed to create a more productive meeting in the future.

Another example of ineffective feedback is when someone asks how a presentation they just gave went, and people respond in generalities: “I thought it went well.” This type of statement is neither specific nor descriptive. It would have been more constructive to have shared, “I liked the fact you opened that session with a story that pulled everyone in, so you had their attention. Your slides had simple visuals to back up your key points, and the examples hit home. You also kept it moving so the pacing was a plus.”

In either case when someone offers feedback, it is helpful to simply thank them. The tendency to want to explain or offer a defensive response will send a message you don’t want feedback. It would be too easy for Chris to tell Pat, “The meeting just came up yesterday, and I didn’t have time to get an agenda out.” When people receiving feedback defend or deflect what is offered, the person sharing their perspective isn’t likely to offer it again.

Feedforward

Feedforward is focused on the future. The leader offering feedforward may share suggestions on how a person or group could do something differently or better in the future. When people ask how their presentation went, rather than critiquing what they just did, it could be helpful to offer a few ideas on what they could do next time to make it more impactful. Marshall Goldsmith writes about the value of Feedforward in his paper “Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback.”

For a new leader who has only been in their role for the past year, it would be far more helpful to offer feedforward, to share what they could do in year two that would enhance their capability and the organization’s ability to be successful. For example, an evaluator could say, “Now that you have created a strategic roadmap (that’s feedback), it will be important to create a communication strategy to share why this is the right direction and what needs to happen to get traction on the initial goals” (feedforward).

Of course, a person can use both feedback and feedforward. When approached by someone who wants to know how their presentation went, it can be instructive for the person being asked to first inquire, “How do you think it went? What do you think you did well? What could you have done differently or better? This opportunity for self-critique allows the individual to reflect and to offer their own feedback, and it lowers their potential to be defensive. This strategy can be followed with feedforward, perhaps suggesting that next time the presenter might consider doing something at the opening to acknowledge or engage the audience.

Feedforward may occur in many interactions without our referring to it as such. A couple might say after a vacation, “If we do this again it would be great if we could stay longer,” or “I’d love to go back to that restaurant or museum.” And in the workplace, people might share their ideas about how they could improve whether as a team or as a service provider.

Leaders need to be effective when it comes to giving and receiving feedback as well as recognizing when to offer or invite feedforward. Both feedback and feedforward are skills a leader can draw on when needed. The more proficient a leader is in recognizing a situation and selecting the best way to address the issues or the behaviors, the more likely people will receive this “gift” well, and performance will improve.