

Try “Feedforward”--You Might Like It

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How did you feel the last time you received feedback? Many people are likely to respond that they dread receiving feedback. Ask most people this question, and you may hear some horror stories!

One reader responded to my article on feedback last week with, “Every time I have experienced feedback with sound equipment, it was an undesirable, jarring experience. Feedback is a metaphor that’s not very attractive. I find it far more effective ‘to share my thoughts’ or ‘tell you what I think.’”

I’ve pondered his point all week. “Feedback” in the workplace does seem to have a negative connotation. Still, very healthy cultures are characterized by team members giving each other lots of both affirming and corrective feedback.

What if you could also focus your dialogue on a potentially successful future rather than on the past? You can do this! You can start using “feedforward” with your organization right away!

Let me acknowledge that the information in this article has been adapted from an essay published by Marshall Goldsmith in the summer, 2002 “Leader to Leader Journal.” Marshall Goldsmith is a highly acclaimed leadership executive, and I use this material with most of my clients.

Feedback can feel like an exercise in proving you wrong, which is often uncomfortable for both the giver and the receiver of the information. Feedforward is an exercise in helping you be successful.

Feedback may be either accepted or rejected, depending on how the information fits with your receptivity and self-image. Feedforward is enjoyable and stimulating.

Feedback requires that the person knows you and has observed your behaviors. Feedforward can come from anyone familiar with the task under consideration.

Feedback is associated with judgment. It feels very “parent to child.” Feedforward is merely option generation, and it reinforces desirable “adult to adult” collaboration.

As noted earlier, feedback is sometimes painful to give and to receive. Feedforward is fun to give and to receive. Once experienced, you usually want more!

How does feedforward work? You approach an individual and describe a behavior which you would like to improve. This can be a simple sentence: “I want to do a better job of delegating.”

You then ask for two suggestions for the future that might help you achieve a positive change in that behavior. (Here’s a caution for those who have worked together. Your feedforward provider may be tempted to judge your past behavior. Ask the person to focus strictly on future possibilities.)

Listen to the suggestions and make written notes. (This not only helps you retain what you heard, it indicates to your partner that you are interested in the suggestions.) When the person is finished, say “Thank you.” (Do NOT evaluate the suggestions in any way! The intent is that you listen deeply with no expectation of responding. This allows you to give your full attention to the speaker.)

Ask the other person if you can return the favor. Ask if there is a behavior he or she would like to improve. Offer two suggestions. If the other person thanks you, merely say “you’re welcome” or “my pleasure.” Walk away grateful for the interaction that occurred.

The whole process can take as little as two or three minutes. That’s not much time to invest for stimulating your and the other person’s creativity about future success!

When I conduct this process for the first time with groups, I usually allow an individual to experience the giving and receiving dialogue three times. Each pairing takes about four minutes (each person in a pair offers two suggestions). Then each person finds another partner and repeats the process.

At the end of no more than fifteen minutes, I ask the members to report their experiences to the group. The energy is always high, and I usually hear something like, “I’m amazed at the good ideas I received in such a short period of time!” The most common response is, “This was fun!”

I suggest you introduce feedforward to those under your authority. You could allocate fifteen minutes once a month to conduct this process with your team, aimed at strengthening both confidence and competence. Imagine the succession of improvements that could occur if you made feedforward a routine part of your organization’s culture!