

The Feedback Fallacy

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The debate about feedback at work isn't new. Since at least the middle of the last century, the question of how to get employees to improve has generated a good deal of opinion and research. But recently the discussion has taken on new intensity. The ongoing experiment in "radical transparency" at Bridgewater Associates and the culture at Netflix, which the *Wall Street Journal* recently described as "encouraging harsh feedback" and subjecting workers to "intense and awkward" real-time 360s, are but two examples of the overriding belief that the way to increase performance in companies is through rigorous, frequent, candid, pervasive, and often critical feedback.

How should we give and receive feedback? we wonder. How much, and how often, and using which new app? And, given the hoopla over the approaches of Bridgewater and Netflix, how hard-edged and fearlessly candid should we be? Behind those questions, however, is another question that we're missing, and it's a crucial one. The search for ways to give and receive better feedback assumes that feedback is always useful. But the only reason we're pursuing it is to help people do better. And when we examine *that*—asking, *How can we help each person thrive and excel?*—we find that the answers take us in a different direction.

To be clear, instruction—telling people what steps to follow or what factual knowledge they're lacking—can be truly useful: That's why we have checklists in airplane cockpits and, more recently, in operating rooms. There is indeed a right way for a nurse to give an injection safely, and if you as a novice nurse miss one of the steps, or if you're unaware of critical facts about a patient's condition, then someone should tell you. But the occasions when the actions or knowledge necessary to minimally perform a job can be objectively defined in advance are rare and becoming rarer. What we mean by

“feedback” is very different. Feedback is about telling people what we think of their performance and how they should do it better—whether they’re giving an effective presentation, leading a team, or creating a strategy. And on that, the research is clear: Telling people what we think of their performance doesn’t help them thrive and excel, and telling people how we think they should improve actually *hinders* learning.

Underpinning the current conviction that feedback is an unalloyed good are three theories that we in the business world commonly accept as truths. The first is that other people are more aware than you are of your weaknesses, and that the best way to help you, therefore, is for them to show you what you cannot see for yourself. We can call this our *theory of the source of truth*. You do not realize that your suit is shabby, that your presentation is boring, or that your voice is grating, so it is up to your colleagues to tell you as plainly as possible “where you stand.” If they didn’t, you would never know, and this would be bad.

The second belief is that the process of learning is like filling up an empty vessel: You lack certain abilities you need to acquire, so your colleagues should teach them to you. We can call this our *theory of learning*. If you’re in sales, how can you possibly close deals if you don’t learn the competency of “mirroring and matching” the prospect? If you’re a teacher, how can you improve if you don’t learn and practice the steps in the latest team-teaching technique or “flipped classroom” format? The thought is that you can’t—and that you need feedback to develop the skills you’re missing.

And the third belief is that great performance is universal, analyzable, and describable, and that once defined, it can be transferred from one person to another, regardless of who each individual is. Hence you can, with feedback about what excellence looks like, understand where you fall short of this ideal and then strive to remedy your shortcomings. We can call this our *theory of excellence*. If you’re a manager, your boss might show you the company’s supervisor-behaviors model, hold you up against it, and tell you what you need to do to more closely hew to it. If you aspire to lead, your firm

might use a 360-degree feedback tool to measure you against its predefined leadership competencies and then suggest various courses or experiences that will enable you to acquire the competencies that your results indicate you lack.

What these three theories have in common is self-centeredness: They take our own expertise and what we are sure is our colleagues' inexpertise as givens; they assume that my way is necessarily your way. But as it turns out, in extrapolating from what creates our own performance to what might create performance in others, we overreach.

Research reveals that none of these theories is true. The more we depend on them, and the more technology we base on them, the *less* learning and productivity we will get from others. To understand why and to see the path to a more effective way of improving performance, let's look more closely at each theory in turn.

The Source of Truth

The first problem with feedback is that humans are unreliable raters of other humans. Over the past 40 years psychometricians have shown in study after study that people don't have the objectivity to hold in their heads a stable definition of an abstract quality, such as *business acumen* or *assertiveness*, and then accurately evaluate someone else on it. Our evaluations are deeply colored by our own understanding of what we're rating others on, our own sense of what good looks like for a particular competency, our harshness or leniency as raters, and our own inherent and unconscious biases. This phenomenon is called the *idiosyncratic rater effect*, and it's large (more than half of your rating of someone else reflects your characteristics, not hers) and resilient (no training can lessen it). In other words, the research shows that feedback is more distortion than truth.

This is why, despite all the training available on how to *receive* feedback, it's such hard work: Recipients have to struggle through this forest of distortion in search of something that they recognize as themselves.

And because your feedback to others is always more you than them, it leads to systematic error, which is magnified when ratings are considered in aggregate. There are only two sorts of measurement error in the world: *random* error, which you can reduce by averaging many readings; and *systematic* error, which you can't.

Unfortunately, we all seem to have left math class remembering the former and not the latter. We've built all our performance and leadership feedback tools as though assessment errors are random, and they're not. They're systematic.

Consider color blindness. If we ask a color-blind person to rate the redness of a particular rose, we won't trust his feedback—we know that he is incapable of seeing, let alone "rating," red. His error isn't random; it's predictable and explainable, and it stems from a flaw in his measurement system; hence, it's systematic. If we then decide to ask seven more color-blind people to rate the redness of our rose, their errors will be equally systematic, and averaging their ratings won't get us any closer to determining the actual redness of the rose. In fact, it's worse than this. Adding up all the inaccurate redness ratings—"gray," "pretty gray," "whitish gray," "muddy brown," and so on—and averaging them leads us *further away* both from learning anything reliable about the individuals' personal experiences of the rose and from the actual truth of how red our rose really is.

What the research has revealed is that we're all color-blind when it comes to abstract attributes, such as *strategic thinking*, *potential*, and *political savvy*. Our inability to rate others on them is predictable and explainable—it is systematic. We cannot remove the error by adding more data inputs and averaging them out, and doing that actually makes the error bigger.

Worse still, although science has long since proven that we are color-blind, in the business world we assume we're clear-eyed. Deep down we don't think we make very many errors at all. We think we're reliable raters of others. We think we're a source of truth. We aren't. We're a source of error.

When a feedback instrument surveys eight colleagues about your business acumen, your score of 3.79 is far greater a distortion than if it simply surveyed one person about you—the 3.79 number is *all* noise, no signal. Given that (a) we're starting to see more of this sort of data-based feedback, (b) this data on you will likely be kept by your company for a very long time, and (c) it will be used to pay, promote, train, and deploy or fire you, you should be worried about just how fundamentally flawed it really is.

The only realm in which humans are an unimpeachable source of truth is that of their own feelings and experiences. Doctors have long known this. When they check up on you post-op, they'll ask, "On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being high, how would you rate your pain?" And if you say, "Five," the doctor may then prescribe all manner of treatments, but what she's unlikely to do is challenge you on your "five." It doesn't make sense, no matter how many operations she has done, to tell you your "five" is wrong, and that, actually, this morning your pain is a "three." It doesn't make sense to try to parse what you mean by "five," and whether any cultural differences might indicate that your "five" is not, in fact, a real "five." It doesn't make sense to hold calibration sessions with other doctors to ensure that your "five" is the same as the other "fives" in the rooms down the hall. Instead, she can be confident that you are the best judge of your pain and that all she can know for sure is that you will be feeling better when you rate your pain lower. Your rating is yours, not hers.

Just as your doctor doesn't know the truth of your pain, we don't know the truth about our colleagues, at least not in any objective way. You may read that workers today—especially Millennials—want to know where they stand. You may occasionally have team members ask you to tell them where they stand, objectively. You may feel that it's

your duty to try to answer these questions. But you can't—none of us can. All we can do—and it's not nothing—is share our own feelings and experiences, our own reactions. Thus we can tell someone whether his voice grates *on us*; whether he's persuasive *to us*; whether his presentation is boring *to us*. We may not be able to tell him where he stands, but we can tell him where he stands *with us*. Those are our truths, not his. This is a humbler claim, but at least it's accurate.

How We Learn

Another of our collective theories is that feedback contains useful information, and that this information is the magic ingredient that will accelerate someone's learning. Again, the research points in the opposite direction. Learning is less a function of adding something that isn't there than it is of recognizing, reinforcing, and refining what already is. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that, neurologically, we grow more in our areas of greater ability (our strengths are our development areas). The brain continues to develop throughout life, but each person's does so differently. Because of your genetic inheritance and the oddities of your early childhood environment, your brain's wiring is utterly unique. Some parts of it have tight thickets of synaptic connections, while others are far less dense, and these patterns are different from one person to the next. According to brain science, people grow far more neurons and synaptic connections where they already have the most neurons and synaptic connections. In other words, each brain grows most where it's already strongest. As Joseph LeDoux, a professor of neuroscience at New York University, memorably described it, "Added connections are therefore more like new buds on a branch rather than new branches." Through this lens, learning looks a lot like building, little by little, on the unique patterns already there within you. Which in turn means learning has to start by finding and understanding those patterns—your patterns, not someone else's.

Second, getting attention to our strengths from others catalyzes learning, whereas attention to our weaknesses smothers it. Neurological science also shows what happens to us when other people focus on what's working within us instead of remediating what isn't. In one experiment scientists split students into two groups. To one group they gave positive coaching, asking the students about their dreams and how they'd go about achieving them. The scientists probed the other group about homework and what the students thought they were doing wrong and needed to fix. While those conversations were happening, the scientists hooked each student up to a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine to see which parts of the brain were most activated in response to these different sorts of attention.

In the brains of the students asked about what they needed to correct, the sympathetic nervous system lit up. This is the "fight or flight" system, which mutes the other parts of the brain and allows us to focus only on the information most necessary to survive. Your brain responds to critical feedback as a threat and narrows its activity. The strong negative emotion produced by criticism "inhibits access to existing neural circuits and invokes cognitive, emotional, and perceptual impairment," psychology and business professor Richard Boyatzis said in summarizing the researchers' findings.

Focusing people on their shortcomings or gaps doesn't enable learning. It impairs it.

In the students who focused on their dreams and how they might achieve them, the sympathetic nervous system was not activated. What lit up instead was the parasympathetic nervous system, sometimes referred to as the "rest and digest" system. To quote Boyatzis again: "The parasympathetic nervous system...stimulates adult neurogenesis (i.e., growth of new neurons)..., a sense of well-being, better immune system functioning, and cognitive, emotional, and perceptual openness."

What findings such as these show us is, first, that learning happens when we see how we might do something better by adding some new nuance or expansion to our own

understanding. Learning rests on our grasp of what we're doing well, not on what we're doing poorly, and certainly not on someone else's sense of what we're doing poorly. And second, that we learn most when someone else pays attention to what's working within us and asks us to cultivate it intelligently. We're often told that the key to learning is to get out of our comfort zones, but these findings contradict that particular chestnut: Take us very far out of our comfort zones, and our brains stop paying attention to anything other than surviving the experience. It's clear that we learn most in our comfort zones, because that's where our neural pathways are most concentrated. It's where we're most open to possibility, most creative, insightful, and productive. That's where feedback must meet us—in our moments of flow.

Excellence

We spend the bulk of our working lives pursuing excellence in the belief that while defining it is easy, the really hard part is codifying how we and everyone else on our team should get there. We've got it backward: Excellence in any endeavor is almost impossible to define, and yet getting there, for each of us, is relatively easy.

Excellence is idiosyncratic. Take funniness—the ability to make others laugh. If you watch early Steve Martin clips, you might land on the idea that excellence at it means strumming a banjo, waggling your knees, and wailing, "I'm a wild and crazy guy!" But watch Jerry Seinfeld, and you might conclude that it means talking about nothing in a slightly annoyed, exasperated tone. And if you watch Sarah Silverman, you might think to yourself, no, it's being caustic, blunt, and rude in an incongruously affectless way. At this point you may begin to perceive the truth that "funny" is inherent to the person.

Watch an NBA game, and you may think to yourself, "Yes, most of them are tall and athletic, but boy, not only does each player have a different role on the team, but even the players in the same role on the same team seem to do it differently." Examine something as specific and as limited as the free throws awarded after fouls, and you'll learn that not only do the top two free-throw shooters in history have utterly different

styles, but one of them, Rick Barry—the best ever on the day he retired (look him up)—didn't even throw overhand.

Excellence seems to be inextricably and wonderfully intertwined with whoever demonstrates it. Each person's version of it is uniquely shaped and is an expression of that person's individuality. Which means that, for each of us, excellence is easy, in that it is a natural, fluid, and intelligent expression of our best extremes. It can be cultivated, but it's unforced.

Excellence is also not the opposite of failure. But in virtually all aspects of human endeavor, people assume that it is and that if they study what leads to pathological functioning and do the reverse—or replace what they found missing—they can create optimal functioning. That assumption is flawed. Study disease and you will learn a lot about disease and precious little about health. Eradicating depression will get you no closer to joy. Divorce is mute on the topic of happy marriage. Exit interviews with employees who leave tell you nothing about why others stay. If you study failure, you'll learn a lot about failure but nothing about how to achieve excellence. Excellence has its own pattern.

And it's even more problematic than that. Excellence and failure often have a lot in common. So if you study ineffective leaders and observe that they have big egos, and then argue that good leaders should not have big egos, you will lead people astray. Why? Because when you do personality assessments with highly effective leaders, you discover that they have very strong egos as well. Telling someone that you must lose your ego to be a good leader is flawed advice. Likewise, if you study poor salespeople, discover that they take rejection personally, and then tell a budding salesperson to avoid doing the same, your advice will be misguided. Why? Because rigorous studies of the best salespeople reveal that they take rejection deeply personally, too.

As it happens, you find that effective leaders put their egos in the service of others, not themselves, and that effective salespeople take rejection personally because they are personally invested in the sale—but the point is that you will never find these things out by studying *ineffective* performance.

Since excellence is idiosyncratic and cannot be learned by studying failure, we can never help another person succeed by holding her performance up against a prefabricated model of excellence, giving her feedback on where she misses the model, and telling her to plug the gaps. That approach will only ever get her to adequate performance. Point out the grammatical flaws in an essay, ask the writer to fix the flaws, and while you may get an essay with good grammar, you won't get a piece of writing that transports the reader. Show a new teacher when her students lost interest and tell her what to do to fix this, and while you may now have a teacher whose students don't fall asleep in class, you won't have one whose students necessarily learn any more.

How to Help People Excel

If we continue to spend our time identifying failure as we see it and giving people feedback about how to avoid it, we'll languish in the business of adequacy. To get into the excellence business we need some new techniques:

Look for outcomes.

Excellence is an outcome, so take note of when a prospect leans into a sales pitch, a project runs smoothly, or an angry customer suddenly calms down. Then turn to the team member who created the outcome and say, "That! Yes, that!" By doing this, you'll stop the flow of work for a moment and pull your colleague's attention back toward something she just did that really worked.

There's a story about how legendary Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry turned around his struggling team. While the other teams were reviewing missed tackles and dropped balls, Landry instead combed through footage of previous games and created for each

player a highlight reel of when he had done something easily, naturally, and effectively. Landry reasoned that while the number of wrong ways to do something was infinite, the number of right ways, for any particular player, was not. It was knowable, and the best way to discover it was to look at plays where that person had done it excellently. From now on, he told each team member, “we only replay your winning plays.”

Now on one level he was doing this to make his team members feel better about themselves because he knew the power of praise. But according to the story, Landry wasn't nearly as interested in praise as he was in learning. His instincts told him that each person would improve his performance most if he could see, in slow motion, what his own personal version of excellence looked like.

You can do the same. Whenever you see one of your people do something that worked for you, that rocked your world just a little, stop for a minute and highlight it. By helping your team member recognize what excellence looks like for her—by saying, “That! Yes, that!”—you're offering her the chance to gain an insight; you're highlighting a pattern that is already there within her so that she can recognize it, anchor it, re-create it, and refine it. That is learning.

Replay your instinctive reactions.

Unlike Landry, you're not going to be able to videotape your people. Instead, learn how to replay to them your own personal reactions. The key is not to tell someone how well she's performed or how good she is. While simple praise isn't a bad thing, you are by no means the authority on what objectively good performance is, and instinctively she knows this. Instead, describe what you experienced when her moment of excellence caught your attention. There's nothing more believable and more authoritative than sharing what you saw from her and how it made you feel. Use phrases such as “This is how that came across for me,” or “This is what that made me think,” or even just “Did you see what you did there?” Those are your reactions—they are your truth—and when you relay them in specific detail, you aren't judging or rating or fixing her; you're simply

reflecting to her the unique “dent” she just made in the world, as seen through your eyes. And precisely because it isn’t a judgment or a rating it is at once more humble and more powerful.