I Have Some Feedback For You

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"Let me give you some feedback." If we are honest, these are not words most of us like hearing, especially when they are offered unsolicited. We know it's somehow important, but that doesn't mean we like it.

Actually the term 'feedback' is much misunderstood and has been diluted and distorted from its original meaning. We need to recover that meaning, because real feedback is vital steering and learning information, and without it both individual performance and overall leadership effectiveness can be severely compromised, as many failures attest (think BP, HBOS, or the major banks that dealt with Bernie Madoff).

As a leader or an ambitious individual contributor, it's vital to make sure you create effective feedback loops **for yourself first,** and then for the rest of the organization. That might mean confronting some discomfort, but not half as much as if you cut yourself off from the stuff.

Oh, and if we want feedback about our business operations, we have to resist the temptation to shoot the messenger!

How poorly-given feedback undermines individual and organisational performance

Most so-called feedback is actually no such thing, and generally does little to help performance (it may actually undermine it). Here are the three most common types of 'imposter-feedback':

Opinion masquerades as feedback which creates unreality and dependence. A typical exchange:

Manager: **"**That was a great presentation".
Staff member: "Thank you."

The manager walks away congratulating themselves on offering praise and "catching people doing things right" etc. But, did the staff member *really* receive much of value? A bit of recognition, fair enough. Reinforcement, you might say? Hmm, to reinforce what? How do they know what to repeat next time? Since they don't know, how can they take responsibility for their own performance when you are not there to tell them?

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Ill-thought-out attempts are made to measure performance. As a child growing up during the later years of the Cold War, I remember wondering what use the 'four minute warning' of impending nuclear attack actually served? (and occasionally, being terrified by factor sirens). What could we actually do on receipt of the warning? Organisations are full of signals that suggest people should be responding to something, but without a clue as to what the response should be. Think of all those forms (for example in the appraisal process, at the end of workshops or on customer 'feedback' forms) that ask you to do the following sorts of things:

How would you rate Mary's work attitude?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How would you rate the content of the session?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How did we do?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

We all fill these in – but is it helping the person receiving it? What is anyone supposed to do with the number? How can the recipient adjust their actions? Are they just supposed to vary their behaviour randomly next time and see if it works better? And if it does, how can they tell which bit of behaviour to keep this time? This is worse than useless, not only because it is pure non-productive busy work, but more insidiously because it is a clear message that "going through the motions is ok round here." The most likely response is disengagement and drift, and more going through the motions.

'Feedback' sessions become an excuse to verbally beat people up, damaging morale. Humanistic ideology has pervaded organisational life, and often opens the door for passive aggression. If you 'should be open to feedback', then someone can beat you up verbally, and then blame you for being defensive when you react badly. People who perceive a threat to their ego respond with hostility or stress, thereby learning nothing and starting to wonder about revising their CV.

What feedback really is, and what it is not

Feedback is steering information, not opinions, evaluations or judgements. Actually that's the whole thing in a nutshell, and in a way, the rest of the article is simply a commentary and illustration of this key idea. Here's why it matters:

- Steering information is not threatening. It is descriptive – not evaluative, judgemental or capricious.

- Steering information is not a matter of biased opinion – it can be validated objectively.

- And steering information is incredibly valuable for all kinds of performance improvement at the individual as well as organisational level.

The scientific basis for this article: it's all Greek to me

I'm not just wildly asserting that people have got the wrong idea about the idea of *feedback*. It's a technical concept with a precise and quite simple meaning. Correctly understood it's a powerful way to manage and improve performance. The term comes from a multi-disciplinary field with a very descriptive name: descriptive that is if you speak ancient Greek! The field is called *cybernetics* – the name of which literally translates as "the art of the steersman." Think of the sailor with the oar over the back of a Spartan ship sailing to Troy, maintaining course by keeping the mast aligned with a star. The ship is constantly being diverted by the wind and the waves – *feedback*[1] is the process which makes successful navigation possible. So what is it?

One of the pioneers of cybernetics, Heinz for Foerster, defined feedback as: *The return of part of a system's output to change its input.* In other words: when the star drifts to the left relative to the mast, that is feedback that the oar is too much to the right. The sailor can recognise his behaviour (the way he is holding the oar) and its effect in the world (the drifting of the star to the left) and adjust accordingly.

The Captain could stand by the navigator all night saying "That's good", or "That's bad", or "I rate you as a 6/10 steersman", but it wouldn't help performance one iota. *The performer must recognise their own behaviour and its effect in the world.*

Poor attempts at feedback

Because of the half-understood influence of some great management thinkers, everyone agrees feedback is important even though they don't agree what it is (no-one ever says: "Feedback is over-rated – let's not bother with it.") So things happen which get called feedback but are at best poor imitations:

Attempting to give feedback when the receiver isn't involved in an active learning process with you. The title of this article is "I have some feedback for you", and I suggest that these are words likely to induce heart-sink in most people. In order for feedback – as opposed to 'correction' or 'punishment' – to be effective, people have got to be actively engaged in a goal-seeking or learning process (motivation is intrinsic: the steersman has to be interested in getting to the destination, and really should be getting a kick out of improving their ability to hold an accurate course – the worse the weather, the better). If your message to someone about their performance is unsolicited or unwelcome, it's likely to be filtered out at best, or resented at worst. If the receiver isn't actively trying to steer somewhere, they will not thank you for your contribution.

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[1] **A word to the wise: I am actually only talking about one kind of feedback here: corrective (a.k.a. balancing, negative) feedback.**

The clumsy feedback sandwich. This well-known "communication technique" is an attempt to make a message more palatable, on the Mary Poppins principle that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down. You say something nice, then you give the feedback (which is presupposed by the entire idea to be a criticism), then you say something else nice. It's a technique which has always struck me as manipulative and, because it is also easy to spot, counterproductive to its aim – if the receiver feels manipulated they are hardly likely to be responsive. One of my coaching clients remarked that when he hears someone saying something positive about his performance, he typically starts bracing himself.

Vague and imprecise information. Even assuming the person is open to your contribution, you need to give them something they can use. The vague abstractions of typical management dialogue ("You need to be more proactive") won't cut it. Another pioneer of in this area, Gregory Bateson, called information "difference which makes a difference". Rating a service 6/10 doesn't give the person responsible much to go on. One organisation I worked with had the following standard question on their session 'feedback' forms:

How well will this session help you in your future career?   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

This expects the respondent to be clairvoyant, and the recipient of the feedback to be a mind-reader.

Leader, Know Thyself

Like the archetypal steersman, someone can only treat incoming information as feedback if they are actively engaged in pursuing some goal. Feedback is something you actively *get*, before it is something you give. So let's start with refining the way we seek and use feedback for *ourselves* to improve our own performance. If that weren't interesting enough, we will then be in a far better position to ensure great feedback for others, and for the whole organisation.

Five keys to getting effective feedback for yourself

1) Set your own goals and performance standards. Remember that feedback is something you actively seek and get. Therefore you must set, or at least negotiate and thoroughly buy into, your own objectives. There's a reason why almost all coaches, consultants and performance experts emphasise goal setting, whether they think about it this way or not: once you have a properly set objectives, you have created the conditions for feedback-guided success.

2) Balance your learning objectives and achievement objectives. Ultimately you are compensated for achievements, not for learning for the sake of it; however, you won't achieve much if you don't continuously learn new things – so you need both. The

steersman wants to successfully navigate to the destination, and to improve their skills along the way.

3) Be clear as to how you will ensure you can recognise your actions in the output.
This is the necessary sophistication that makes goal-setting really work. Get good at setting objectives and tracking measures in 'sensory' terms. Demand of yourself that you specify observable behaviour and evidence in the environment. A handy way to approach this is to formulate *video descriptions.* Imagine you are being shadowed by a film crew. What will you see and hear on the playback that will prove you are on-course or off-course?

4) Avoid dysfunctional perfectionism by setting MIN...MAX goals. Success is usually a matter of degree more than a matter of absolutes. Ambitious goals are great, but don't be like the parent of my friend who said: "You got three As and a B – are you going to stay in school another year to turn the B into an A?" He was qualified to go to any University in the land at that point having achieved comfortably within the MIN...MAX range required. Job done. Similarly, going in to any business meeting or discussion – be it in a complex sale, negotiation or organisational change project for example – the MAX is usually easy to specify, but do you also take the time to clarify what is the minimum objective that constitutes progress?

5) Use the 3Q formula to build on strength and bounce back from disappointment.
Ask yourself the three coaching questions:

1. What did I do that worked?

2. What did I do better than last time?

3. What do I want to work on next?

I learned these from a top football coach. They work amazingly well (the real accelerator questions is number 2, because it creates *amplifying* feedback – literally a "runaway success") both to tell your brain to continue to focus on what is working, and to frame disappointing results in as constructive a light as possible.

Involving others as a source of feedback

So far all the techniques rely on you getting your own feedback without help – consistent with the ideal of self-mastery. However, we must acknowledge our need for outside input too, or else all we end up with are our own voices echoing around our heads. That way madness lies, as high-profile political and business leaders demonstrate all too often. Involving others is an art: here are three key considerations.

1) Careful who you ask. Consider a) their motives – your decision might influence their career prospects, b) their ability to describe situations so you can actually detect your behaviour in it – fluffy generalities won't help you, and c) if you do choose to seek an

expert opinion rather than an observation, then make sure it in an area where they are really qualified (it's only an expert opinion in those situations where they are experts, but we tend to extrapolate: one recent series of financial service adverts featured a presenter a from numerical game show).

2) If you ask for it, don't get upset if you don't like it (instead, be forensic). Francois de La Rochefoucauld said that "Few people have the wisdom to prefer the criticism that would do them good, to the praise that deceives them." The messenger might be clumsy in the way they express themselves. If you shoot them, you'll never get any more out of them (or what you do get will be disinformation designed to massage your ego and keep the messenger from taking another bullet). If the other party says something you don't want to hear ("Staff morale is poor and they think you don't take any notice of the employee survey", or "Our engineers are playing fast and loose with the safety rules because they think you prioritise profits over compliance, and the operation is an accident waiting to happen" or "Managers at two levels below you are turning a blind eye to traders' non-compliant behaviour despite repeated warnings from risk managers") you need to take a forensic approach. Get them to restate their message in sensory specific (video descriptive) terms that you can validate or safely dismiss. Make allowances for other people's clumsiness in expressing their messages. By the way, in general, having seen messenger after messenger shot for speaking truth to power, most people keep their mouths shut, or offer sugar-coated platitudes. As events of the last decade show all too well, this leads to serious blind-spots and costs much treasure and sometimes, in safety-critical industries, blood, too. You must ensure you have ways to get the information people try to keep from you.

3) Rather than shooting the messenger, be Machiavellian[2]. How is the Prince to deal with the conflicting needs to avoid blind-spots yet maintain the dignity required of their position? Machiavelli's prescription is elegant. You should have carefully selected advisors, and only they are allowed to give you their views. You should insist that they tell it to you straight (and ensure this through rewards and punishments as appropriate). You should also insist that they only give you advice when you ask for it. Add a good whistleblower policy (and insist that whistleblowers come up with verifiable evidence), mystery shop your own business (yourself wherever possible), and you will be well informed.

Giving feedback

The more you consciously seek your own feedback, using the approaches above, the more you will naturally get better at ensuring others get useful feedback too. Giving and receiving really are two sides of the same coin.

The key extra dimension is to recognise that most people are like Winston Churchill when he said "I am always ready to learn something; I am not always ready to be taught."

[2] **I am indebted to my friend Alastair Dryburgh for drawing my attention to Machiavelli's advice on this topic.**

If you show yourself to be a willing seeker of feedback for yourself, it will be easier. It's incredibly powerful if you say to one of your direct reports: "Look. More important than the feedback I give you is the feedback you get for yourself, because that way you are building your self-reliance and ability to take a lead. At the same time, it's really powerful to have outside input because we all lose sight of the wood for the trees sometimes. Here's how I go about getting feedback, and I'd like to suggest we take a similar approach."

Seven keys to ensuring good feedback to your people

These keys apply both in your one-to-one relationships with direct reports, and to the process of feedback within the organisation as a whole.

1) Make sure you have a learning context first. Like all successful influence, the context – especially the shared understanding of what kind of relationship you are engaged in – makes all the difference to the meaning of and response to you communication. Think about a tough mentor (or boss, or fitness trainer, or sports coach – someone engaged with you in something that you really cared about) who you really respected, and who you knew to be committed to your success. You would take candid and even brusque input from them and *use it positively* even if it bruised a bit. Compare that with your response when you have no respect for the source of input. Then, even the most diplomatically couched message – especially the dreaded feedback sandwich – can be like crumbs in the bedclothes. What's the internal dialogue of most sales teams when they are listening to the manager giving them a pep-talk? What's your internal dialogue like when being appraised by someone you don't respect? Not conducive to high performance is it?

2) Agree clear goals with recognisable evidence. We have already discussed this process when we dealt with your own feedback requirements. Think yourself into the other person's situation and verify that they will have the information they need to be self-steering. Do your salespeople and purchasing agents know the effects of their decisions on your cashflow, for example?

3) Ask questions to encourage active engagement in feedback seeking. If I'm coaching a leader in the way they conduct their senior team meetings, it's far more powerful (not to say less error-prone) to say: "Did you notice how Julia responded when you changed the subject?" rather than "You snubbed Julia by ignoring her contribution."

4) Make feedback as specific as possible: use video description. Remember, they can only turn your message into feedback if they can recognise their behaviour in the information coming back to them. Don't say "That was a great presentation", say "Because you highlighted the key figures rather than cluttering the screen with a mass of data, and then gave people the chance to ask questions of clarification before moving on, more people got involved in the subsequent discussion and gave their clear verbal agreement to the final decision, rather than the usual passive acquiescence."

5) Focus on behaviour/skills used as well as results. The Army has a saying: "The other side gets a vote." In business, results depend to some degree on the decisions of people outside our control (a good business design attempts to minimise that as much as possible of course, but that external factor always exists). If you only provide binary win/lose feedback, there just isn't enough, or frequent enough, steering information for people who are learning, or are engaged in completely new endeavours. So make sure feedback shows how well people are performing the skills likely to produce success.

6) Use the 3Q formula to build on strength. Rather than the manipulation-prone feedback sandwich, remember the three coaching questions: What did they do that worked? What did they do better this time than last time? What do you suggest they work on next?

7) Make feedback frequent and timely. You know what it's like trying to have a phone call with a delay, or adjusting the shower temperature in a hotel when there's a delay? Delays make it hard for people to relate their behaviour to its results. What does that mean for the learning ability of organisations where the only 'feedback' people get is at a yearly appraisal?

The acid test: does it tell you which direction to go in next?

Understanding feedback as steering information simultaneously makes it more useful and less threatening. Disappointing results can then be reinterpreted not as evidence of final failure, but as clues as to what to do in order to improve. And successful results can be mined for insights as to what to do to build further success in the future.

Set things up at the outset with feedback in mind, then you can get and give feedback easily. It is a vital element underlying all successful performance and learning.

Of course no-one wants to hear of disappointing results, and even if you adopt the feedback mindset, it can still be a bruise to the ego. Leaders in particular must be alert to their tendency to avoid such news, as the history of the last decade makes only too clear.

Finally, remember the key to understanding and unlocking the dramatic performance-enhancing potential of feedback: in order to learn, you (and they) have to be able to recognise your actions in the results.

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