

## Feedback – the lifeblood of leadership

*‘The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing’ John Powell*

*‘In giving advice seek to help, not to please, your friend’ Solon*

Feedback is essential to moving towards our outcomes and learning. Feedback is available all the time from our environment, our own bodies and minds and from other people’s behaviours and reactions to us. Giving and receiving high quality feedback in a work or personal situation is essential to achieving success.

Imagine aiming for a goal and not getting any feedback about how you are doing in getting to it. We would flounder to know what we needed to do. So, to move towards any of our outcomes feedback provides that important guidance system.



### Our Feedback ‘Auto-Pilot’

Given the value of feedback it is shocking to read in the Harvard Business Review March 2016 (see references) that more than two thirds of managers are uncomfortable communicating with their employees and a third are specifically uncomfortable with giving direct feedback.

Many managers and leaders we speak to reflect this to us – the body language reaction to the word feedback alone tell us this tale!

That article also references another HBR Article from April 2015 about the assumptions that we make about giving feedback that make it even harder for us to give it.

So where do these assumptions come from? – as in all of our patterns of thinking and behaviour they are set up throughout our lives and establish a well-worn Autopilot of ‘how I deal with feedback’ - both giving and receiving it. Do you recognise any of these common thoughts;

‘They should just know how to do this, I shouldn’t need to tell them’

‘They will get upset and I don’t like conflict’  
 ‘Oh no! I got it wrong, how stupid am I, now they’re going to think I’m really bad at my job’  
 On being paid a compliment: ‘Oh it’s nothing!’  
 ‘Why did they get upset? It was only feedback!’  
 ‘Why can’t people tell me what they really think?’  
 ‘I’m so experienced I don’t need feedback’  
 I wish someone would I tell me whether I’m getting this right or not’

And your automatic reactions will be specific to you. So firstly, it’s useful to understand how we’ve established these automatic reactions and take a look at how well they are serving us.

### Exercise – Mapping our feedback Autopilot

- Draw a line of your life across a page – now map onto it in any way you like the moments when you’ve given or received feedback that made an impact. These may be to or from parents, managers, friends, teachers, co-workers, team mates in a sports team, siblings – at any stage in your personal or work life.
- Now record your reaction to these situations and the beliefs you came away with from them – for example, did you get great praise from someone that built up your confidence in what you can do? Maybe you got some feedback that hurt that you learned how ‘not to’ give feedback from? Maybe you gave some feedback and the person has been forever grateful or has never spoken to you since?
- These situations as for all our Autopilots build up a series of beliefs and assumptions within us that guide our future actions around this topic. So having mapped this out, summarise what your key beliefs are now about giving and receiving feedback. How do these guide your actions?

A key part of our feedback Autopilot is whether we prefer to gain feedback from others and the outside world or from ourselves and the inside world – that is where do we go as our reference point for feedback?

A useful way to look at this is in answer to the question ‘How do you know that you are doing a good job?’ How do you respond?

I just know inside myself

Because others will tell me



### Reflect

Where do you place your response on this continuum? Are you more likely to pay attention to your own internal reference, feeling, sense or to the results you've created in others/the world around you, your external reference point?

Looking back at your feedback Auto-Pilot guiding assumptions – how do they match your internal or external referencing?

Both ends of this continuum are important to access. We need to have our own internal monitor on our progress, issues, success and to be able then to compare that to our external sources of feedback so that we are getting the widest perspective on our impact.

If we have a strong preference for internal referencing, we may miss vital signs that our impact is not how we perceive it to be. In extremis this can cause someone to lose their job and have no idea why. I know a leader who has lost jobs, spouses and children and even been to jail, and still maintains an internal view that it's not about them!

If we have a strong preference for external sources of feedback we may 'blow in the wind' around who's opinion we pay attention to, attempt to please everyone and burn ourselves out in the process. This is my personal journey – having learned about internal referencing I have been much more responsive to my own gut feelings and personal wisdom, creating a more resilient balance from which to act.

Now you have your Auto-Pilot map into your awareness let's look at the nature of feedback and how you can use it to become the life-blood of your leadership.

### **'There is no failure, only feedback'** – NLP Pre-supposition

**Feedback = data = awareness = choice = flexibility = develop and grow**

The pre-supposition above 'pre-supposes' that there is useful feedback to be gained from any situation. Employing this mind-set can free us from our unhelpful assumptions and give us an opportunity for growth. All living and engineering systems thrive on feedback – they have feedback loops built in to enable them to monitor and stay on track, learn and develop.

How do you create the feedback loops in your life and work that can enable this in you?

'How' is the important word here. We've all had, and probably given, feedback that if provided in a different way would have 'landed' and given an opportunity for growth, when in fact it fell on fallow ground. Maybe because it was given out of anger or fear or received in the same emotions. Maybe because it was too general and didn't give us any examples that

we could ground our response in. Maybe because it was feedback that was more about the person giving it than the person receiving it.

Below we look at some of the key enablers to giving and receiving feedback as life-blood.

### **Cultivating a feedback mind-set**

The mind-set with which we approach any task or situation will govern our behaviour – so it's always useful to consider what mind-set we are bringing (often our Auto-Pilot mind-set) and what mind-set will give us the outcome that we want.

The key question to understand our mind-set here when giving feedback is 'What is the reason I am giving this feedback?' Thinking of feedback as life-blood, the most effective answer is to help this person to develop and grow. Cultivating this mind-set is a starting point for giving high quality feedback – which will then lead us to find ways to give feedback more often and to then normalise it as a positive part of our leadership practice.

For receiving feedback as life-blood it is to embrace feedback as data that you can use to assess and monitor your impact. Without that data we don't have a full perspective on our impact and so will make a limited assessment of our progress. So, the other mind-set here is to be proactive and seek it. Feedback we've asked for is often the easiest to receive because we have taken control of the process and are already in the mind-set to use it for growth.

### **What is 'high quality' feedback?**

Over the years I've asked countless leaders what constitutes 'High Quality' feedback. Their distilled wisdom is:

- verbal
- face-to-face
- individual (one-to-one in private)
- balanced and in context
- honest
- first hand ('I' think)
- to do with the role, outcomes and objectives of that individual
- about the behaviour, not the person (when you do this....)
- detailed and specific (with one or two examples)
- timely to the behaviour (as soon as possible)
- about what is changeable (with alternatives available for suggestion)
- 2 + or – 1 things to change
- two-way (opportunity to respond and clarify)
- contains no 'buts' – just 'ands'
- In ratio of 5 appreciative to 1 developmental

### Reflect

Look at this set of criteria – how do they match your assumptions about feedback?

For each one answer the question ‘How does this enable the feedback to land?’

### How to give High Quality Feedback

- Build and maintain rapport with the receiver – recognise their map of the world and give the feedback in a way they are most likely to be able to hear it - feedback that falls on deaf ears is wasted. Feedback that falls on ‘different ears’ can be distorted by the receiver – for good or bad - and time spent thinking through how to give it to this individual will benefit you both
- Ask ‘Why am I giving this feedback?’ the only valid answer for feedback likely to land is in order to help and develop the other person
- Ask if it’s OK to give some feedback or set up a feedback process with them – permission will make it easier for the receiver to hear
- Give the receiver opportunity to seek clarification and give their viewpoint
- Acknowledge that it is always subjective, and that 2-way communication is key
- Check the landing and impact of the feedback.

### How to receive feedback

- Have rapport with the giver
- Help the giver to be specific by asking Who? When? Where? How? Which? And ask for suggestions for alternative behaviours.
- Feedback that is requested is likely to be the most useful to the receiver – by asking questions of the giver you show you want the feedback
- Seek the learning – you don’t need to explain, blame, justify, defend or placate!
- Say ‘Thankyou’ as it has given you some data
- It’s data! You choose how to take it on board or not...

### Reflect

Compare these approaches to your typical giving and receiving Auto-Pilot – where do you want to build your flexibility as a giver and receiver? What actions can you commit to to practice this in the next 48 hours?

## Feedback frames

Often it helps to give a frame within which to give/receive feedback that provides some language and pre-suppositions that guide us to give higher quality feedback. These can be very simple:

What delighted me was..  
What concerns me is....

**What I'd like to see you:**

**Stop**

**Start**

**Continue**

**..doing is.....**

More of  
Less of

**What would move us forward is...**

**What I'd like us to leave behind.....**

You can construct your own easily – think about the outcome of the conversation you are having and what feedback would help everyone involved to move towards that outcome?

For example, you are running a team away-day and you want people to leave having created new ways of thinking and acting – so at the beginning of the day you could give feedback framed as:

**What I appreciate about how you currently work is...**

**What I want to see you develop is...**

At the end of the day you could ask them :

What are the new ways of working that you are going to go away and put into practice?

What have you learned about yourself today that will help you with this?

**DESC:**

DESC is a process for giving high quality feedback

<b>Describe</b>	When you ..... (describe the specific behaviour)
<b>Emote</b>	I experience..... (your felt response to this behaviour)
<b>Specific</b>	I want you to..... (describe specific preferred behaviour)
<b>Consequences</b>	If you do that ..... (state what will happen)  If you don't do that ..... (this will be the consequence and the next step of the action that will trigger)  Agree a review period to measure the difference

In order to have a conversation like this you may benefit from preparing and rehearsing it. Once you become familiar with the model, you will find you can use it automatically. It is a very clear and effective way to express change to someone. The DESC process can also be used as a general coaching tool where you use it as a feedback model and describe your impression of someone's behaviour and then work with them to illicit what the choices of preferred behaviour might be, and what the positive and negative consequences of the new behaviour could bring.

**Reflect**

Think of a situation coming up where giving feedback would enable some useful growth. What do you want to achieve from that interaction? What would be a useful feedback frame to use to move towards that outcome?

### Ideas about putting it into practice

To help get your new practice of life-blood feedback going here are a few suggestions for applications:

- Ask a couple of colleagues to enter into a mutual feedback process with you around your development as a leader. Identify the areas of development you want to make and ask for feedback about the specific changes you are making so that they know what feedback you need/want
- Start to give positive feedback more often to your colleagues, boss, friends, family...see what happens!
- Think about feedback you are about to give and check it against the criteria above...does it meet the criteria to make it high quality?
- Think about your processes for giving feedback ongoing – 1:1's, team meetings, ad hoc, project-based – so that you develop this through the year and appraisals become a collation of the year of feedback
- Review your team – what seem to be their feedback Auto-Pilots? How can you work with them to bring feedback to life as their life-blood?

### References

<https://hbr.org/2015/04/the-assumptions-that-make-giving-tough-feedback-even-tougher>

[https://hbr.org/2016/03/two-thirds-of-managers-are-uncomfortable-communicating-with-employees?utm\\_campaign=HBR&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social](https://hbr.org/2016/03/two-thirds-of-managers-are-uncomfortable-communicating-with-employees?utm_campaign=HBR&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social)