Asking for Feedback

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Asking for feedback, like learning to give feedback, is an art. Our culture is one in which asking for feedback can be awkward, a moment of vulnerability that goes against the unspoken rules of society to protect oneself from adverse data and potential conflict.

As a consequence most of us have never learned the skill of eliciting the views others hold privately about us. Yet the benefits of acquiring and acting on this information are extensive. Asking for feedback can disarm conflict and clear up misunderstandings. It can help identify areas of strength and show how these strengths may also create blind spots in our relationships. Feedback leads to disclosure, which in turn builds trust, which means problem-solving can improve as stress in communications is reduced. We have a chance to deal with things the way they are, not just as we assume them to be.

In a work place, these outcomes can be a particular value. The work place and the way we work together are changing greatly. More than ever the capacity to create clear, open communications rapidly will be a necessary skill as we use a network of empowered teams to move from project to project, shifting memberships frequently to accomplish a multitude of new tasks.

To learn the art of asking for and acting on feedback demands both patience and practice. Because people are not used to others seeking this sensitive data, they may be reluctant to immediately open up or may just comment that "there are no problems." So the irony is that to ultimately reduce tensions in a relationship, one may have to endure, even create, a little tension in order to get the ball rolling.

This paper examines methods for starting a feedback process. It begins with a model that describes levels of "depth" in getting feedback from others and then explores ways that you can productively elicit and act on feedback, even when it is sensitive and personal. The model, like all models, represents theory. The discussion of how to elicit and act on feedback is more concrete and includes specific things to say and do to make the process of getting feedback easier.

Levels of Feedback

There are three levels of feedback that a person or group can seek out. If you are interested in acquiring the full value of what others have to offer, you will elicit all three. But to do so may mean entering into some sensitive territory. If you are uncomfortable with feedback, you may wish to start the process asking for it on a less personal level, working toward more difficult topics as your skill develops. In making a decision about what types of feedback to request you should carefully consider your own level of defensiveness. If you can ask about

work systems with confidence, but feel discomfort asking about "squishy" topics such as relationships and communications, start with the more concrete; then gradually move toward the more people and relationships oriented domains.

In summary form, the three levels of feedback, with increasing sensitivity, are:

> **Feedback about processes** -- specifically, work processes or technical processes that can be described as a set of impersonal tasks. For example, the steps defining how an invoice is paid is an example of a process.
> **Feedback about how your behavior influences processes** -- such as the way people follow or disregard a standard operating procedure and what impact that has on performance outcomes.
> **Feedback about your relationships, communications, leadership and other sensitive areas** -- such as data about how you interact with and talk with people, including perceptions of you that others may share with one another but not with you directly.

No matter which level of feedback you choose to gather, the following five steps can be used as a template for how to proceed:

> **Vision** -- the standard or ideal that is used to focus the conversation. Before actually talking with others, it is very helpful to describe what you ultimately hope to achieve by hearing and acting on the feedback.

> **Ask for feedback** -- the specific question or method used to elicit information from others. Again, it is well worth the effort to refine the questions.

> **Search for patterns/learn** -- what you must do to evaluate the information you receive. At every level, it is important to locate meaningful patterns. The data you must be able to assess includes, not only the facts, but also the perceptions of others, their perspectives and beliefs, and whether or not you agree with these opinions.

> **Plan, try out possible changes** -- taking the learning of the previous stages and turning it into a trial change -- in a work process, in your own behavior, or both.

> **Assess results and incorporate useful changes** -- after some period, you will need to evaluate what improvements have worked and how you can maintain these improvements long-term.

So how do you use this process?

 Let's assume that you are a manager responsible for a production department. The department is dependent on orders placed through a sales force and that a common problem is missed deadlines for production. Although you are working hard, the production department is viewed as a "bottleneck" in the

organization and as manager you are somewhat mistrusted (although you haven't been directly informed of this fact).

Feedback about the process

At the least sensitive level, you could ask for data about the obvious work process problem: deadlines are being missed. The problem is depersonalized entirely and the issue of individual reputation and performance are hidden. The five-step process of asking about missed deadlines, assessing the patterns, developing some trial counter-measures, and then incorporating improvements can be highly useful.

This first level of evaluating process data is an excellent point to begin asking for feedback in an organization where open communication has been stifled or people are extremely hesitant to speak up about their own issues and concerns. The depersonalized nature of the inquiry can help make everyone feel safer.

But this can also be deceptive. People may believe that although the question is framed in terms of the process (for example, "what deadlines are being missed") there may be a great deal of unspoken fear that the real agenda is "undiscussable." The underlying question people may believe you are asking is "*who* is missing deadlines?" and therefore hesitate to discuss the problem in an open way. Consequently, it is important to maintain consistency in approach. If the request for feedback is about the work process, the problem-solving and counter-measure discussions need to stay similarly impersonal until additional trust has been created.

Feedback about the interaction of individual performance and process performance

At the next level, you can begin to ask about how your own behavior (not others' behavior) influences how well various technical processes are working. For example, if you are budget manager, you can ask people whether they feel the budgeting method effectively distributes resources. Obviously this is a question that is about your own area, and indirectly about your own performance. But it is still somewhat depersonalized and focused on process improvements rather than personal performance.

In the production department example, you might ask about how your own performance influences deadlines and discover that one of your performance strengths -- putting out fires -- in fact is covering over the deeper, more systemic problems that need to be addressed. Helping people talk with you about their perceptions of how this happens can lead to some highly effective problem-solving.

Those giving feedback are likely to recognize in your request for feedback your vulnerability. Particularly if you phrase the request in generous terms -- such as "you are my customers -- I value your feedback" -- people

usually respond graciously and constructively. However, there is some danger of personal defensiveness if you feel your "customers" are unappreciative of your work.

At this level people may try to protect you by softening their criticisms unnecessarily. In asking for feedback about processes that are close to personal performance, people can feel some ambiguity. They may wonder if you really are asking for in-depth feedback or only depersonalized suggestions. They may not want to hurt your feelings. They may erroneously conclude that what you really want is support and validation. They may not feel it is their place to share their true observations.

This second type of feedback may certainly bring you a step closer to others' core perceptions of you, but you may sense in the asking some hesitancy or "undiscussable" issues near but not directly in your conversation.

Feedback about relationships and communications

The third level of feedback opens the conversation to sensitive observations about interpersonal communications, style, reputation, leadership, or similar intangibles. At this level, you are asking others for their candid perceptions of how you behave compared to important personal values such as honesty and concern for others.

Talking at this level can produce higher levels of trust because, when handled correctly, it proves the self-esteem and basic integrity of the person asking for feedback. To evaluate the perceptions, positive and negative, of others in a fair-minded, open way fosters an attitude of acceptance for the person asking, particularly when the perceptions shared result in visible personal change.

For example, as production manager, what you might learn at this level is that some of your colleagues harbor a few negative assumptions about your motives. Perhaps you learn that not everyone sees you as "honest" as you see yourself, and there is mistrust as a result. And you discover this reputation is closely tied to how you are communicating the capacities of your department. You find that your natural desire to please others and assist them is resulting in an opposite effect: people feel like you do not care as much as you should about helping them. If you did, they say, you would be more open about what your department can and cannot accomplish.

Clearly, the conversation can be tough at this third level. You may have to deal with views that violate your own sense of your values and identity. (For example, you are seen as "dishonest.") Listening to these views will cause defensiveness. But the payoff comes when in asking a few more questions you discover what behaviors or incidents have led others to this

conclusion. You then have a chance to understand others' reactions and can determine for yourself whether you wish to change the way you think and act.

The third level of feedback is where the causes of mistrust surface. The other two levels, as useful as they are, do not optimize the opportunities for improvement. This is because no work process is perfect and we must always to some degree rely on our informal communications and relationships with one another. If we never penetrate to this level, the most important process improvements may never get made.

One example of this is an engineering firm with which I consulted. Although the organization's leaders expressed a strong desire to improve quality and made some minor process changes in accordance with quality improvement theory, the largest opportunities for change were consistently defeated by mistrust and competition among managers of the various divisions. Contractors to the firm made literally hundreds of errors in projects but my client organization was unable to address this problem openly because it would have meant evaluating their own managers' technical and managerial competence and mistrust of one another.

Because the third level of feedback is delicate, but also offers such high leverage in terms of improvement, the remainder of this paper is devoted to describing in more detail how you can go about asking for sensitive, interpersonal data. The assumption behind this is that if you are prepared to operate at this deepest level, you should also be able to ask for feedback at the other two levels as well. Then, even if you begin talking with others at the level of process performance, you can comfortably dive below the water-line when you need to.

Opening the Conversation

It helps, particularly at the beginning of the conversation, to have a clear idea in mind about why asking for feedback will be helpful to you. You will need to articulate your underlying values and vision of effective relationships. You should be able to discuss how you will use the data:

> "Mary, as team leader I want to create more open and direct communications. When I first started here, open communication was one of the things I liked best about this organization. But, I think over time some of this has eroded. Now that I'm in a position to lead, I'd like to develop open relationships with everyone I work with. Would you be willing to give me a few moments of your time to tell me about how you see coming across as leader -- what you see as my strengths and where I need to improve?"

In this example, the leader is basing the effort to get personal feedback on primary values -- open and direct communications -- and a memory of what the organization was like in the past. This could establish some common ground.

The leader might improve this opening statement by adding how the data will be used.

> "I'm asking for your own personal views of how I could get better as a leader. This information is confidential between us. I am in the process of talking one-on-one with several people I think could be of great help to me. I'm going to be looking for patterns in what people tell me, and then from that information put together a personal improvement plan."

Sometimes the context is even more obvious, as in:

> "Bill, at a recent training event I learned that I should conduct a check of how I am coming across as a co-worker and colleague. Do you have time to talk with me about this?"

> "Sean, as part of the company's strategic work, everyone in a supervisory role has been asked to talk with their "internal customers," and get some feedback. Could you help me here?"

Note that in these examples, the leader is *asking* for feedback, inviting not demanding it. As a consulting colleague is fond of saying, "feedback is a gift." It really cannot be required. If several of those asked are reticent to give information, that itself may be a message about how approachable you seem or how tense your environment may be.

Let's suppose, that when you ask for feedback, you get a lot of hesitancy or glib, fast-answers that deflect the conversation. What then?

Don't get impatient or critical. People probably won't be perfectly candid the first time out. In particular, don't get offended by this. People being tense or self-protective probably is not an issue of respect for you. Keep in mind that you are in territory that has been taboo in work relationships for a long time.

Instead, learn to help others open up by taking very small steps forward. You could:

> **Notice the silence or discomfort:** "This seems a bit awkward, I know, but perhaps this awkwardness is in some way related to the feedback I should be getting or how we've operated in the past. Perhaps there are some sensitive issues for us to talk about."
>
> > This response helps open the door because it calls attention to the obvious and makes it clear you are willing to talk about how the interaction *feels*. That may be enough to help the other person get started.
>
> **Start with a disclosure:** "I've heard from some that I have a bad habit of taking too long with decisions. What have you observed personally about how I make decisions?"

This response narrows the field of inquiry, again, making it easier to get started. It can be used in a repetitive way to get to the level of specificity most comfortable to the person giving feedback. For example, the field could be narrowed again by asking, "How about the Williamsbrook order? How do you feel about my decision on that one?"

Go back to reasons why in a more personal way: "Jan, I'm asking for this information so that I can be more effective as a leader. I respect your skills as a professional and I like the way you think. I believe you will give me an honest and objective point of view. "

This approach provides reassurance that you have no hidden agenda in asking the person for feedback and that you are looking for honesty. Sometimes people need to hear the opening remarks more than once in order to be comfortable and to trust the request.

Ask about reluctance directly: "Juan, you seem to be a little cautious about sharing your opinions. Can you tell me what that's about?"

In this response, you are getting directly at the trouble. This may lead to immediate feedback or some type of deflection, such as: "I don't want to hurt your feelings" or "I was raised never to criticize -- if you don't have something positive to say about someone, don't say anything at all." Whatever these reasons are, they should be accepted at face value. What you may be able to do is comment on the reasons. For example:

> "Well, you are right, Juan, it is possible you will hurt my feelings. But I am expecting some of that and I know you wouldn't want to hurt me intentionally, and I want you to talk openly. If I feel you are being too harsh, I'll let you know."

> "Why don't you just go ahead and talk about my strengths. Perhaps as we go, I'll be able to ask some questions that will help guide us through sensitive areas without too much of a feeling of criticism."

Reducing the Effects of Defensiveness

These comments and questions are intended to reduce the natural defensiveness of the person asked for feedback. But you, of course, will feel defensive, too. It may be helpful, therefore, to know about how you typically express your need for self-protection and be able to talk about it.

The point is that you may not be able to prevent a defensive reaction. But if you can talk with those from whom you've ask for information, you may be able to lessen the negative effects. For example:

> "It sounds like you are worried I'll get defensive. Is that it, Cherie? I think you may be right. What I know about myself is that I can start to get wound up in myself when presented with bad news about how I'm coming across. When that happens, I can seem to tune out, not to be listening because I've focused on what's going on in my head. If you see this happening to me, just say something about it. That's generally enough to get me back into the conversation."

> "Tom, I do know that I have a habit of becoming visibly irritated when brought bad news and I will try to check this. If I do show this, I want you to give me a moment to regain my composure and then keep going. Please don't take my reaction personally. This is something I've been working on for a long time."

> "To be frank, when I talk about emotional topics, sometimes I have a hard time not showing tears. If this happens, I hope you'll realize that the tears are my reactions, not necessarily what you've said or done. If I need a moment I'll let you know."

Preparing to make comments like these may actually prevent some of the defensive reaction from occurring. Often times trying to stifle defensiveness just creates more because, ironically, the defensive reactions feed off the energy used to suppress them.

Getting at the Patterns

At some point in the quest for feedback, you get your wish. People begin to open up and to tell you about how they view you, both positive and negative. How do you channel what people say so that you get the information of maximum value?

The goal is to get at the patterns in the perceptions of how others see you. And to get at these patterns, the easiest thing to do is to listen without interpretation to what is being said. As the feedback comes in from several people, let the patterns emerge, whatever they may be. This may be a little difficult to do because people do not easily separate their observations of others' *behavior* from their conclusions about what this *behavior means.*

For instance, you may be viewed as an "excellent leader" by several people, but that does not tell you what specific behaviors you exhibit that bring others to this conclusion. To get to the behavioral level, you must *ask questions about doing that are in the realm of the senses* -- what others have seen or have heard.

> "Cynthia, you say my skills as a leader are very good. What have you seen me do or heard me say that has led you to this opinion?"

>"Can you think of an incident in which I've been involved that would help me understand your conclusion about my leadership skills?"

This effort to connect behavior to the conclusions drawn is vitally important when asking about more negative data.

>"You are suggesting that sometimes I seem to come across as too controlling. Do I have that right? What have I done or said that would be an example?"

These efforts to get more specific and to separate out conclusions from behavior are sometimes foiled if relationships are tense. People may be willing to discuss their general assessments and labels but not examples. This is not unusual when mistrust prevails. The person asked for feedback may say:

>"Well, I can't think of an example right now. But I believe it's something for you to think about."

Again, do not try to put the person on the spot or coerce a greater level of information. Recognize that this is defensive behavior and *invite* participation.

>"All right, Bob. I appreciate your letting me know about the control issue. If you can think of an example as we continue to talk or later on, I'd find that very helpful. I'm trying to get at blind spots, so by definition, I'll need help seeing some parts of the problem."

Or you might try out an example or two where you believe the conclusion has come from.

>"How about the way the shift rotation issue was handled? Did you see this pattern, the control issue, surface as we dealt with the move?"

As you work at getting down to behavioral data and the conclusions made about this data, it is tempting to trying to reinterpret for the other person or demonstrate their faulty views. This is especially common when the perceptions are offensive to you. You may want to deny and explain, saying something like:

>"It's not control that I was after. It was just a tough schedule and decisions had to be made quickly."

Don't get sucked into this type of rationalizing speech. Set aside the natural inclination to defend in favor of simply trying to understand the other person's reasoning process. This must be done genuinely, with a tone of true openness and inquiry:

>"So when I made a lot of quick decisions about the project and did not consult with everyone else on the team, I was seen as controlling? Did I get that right?"

This second approach may lead to even more specific questions about behavior that the other person can answer for you. Don't be afraid to show some vulnerability, to disclose your feelings, as you do this:

>"Was it that I 'announced' these decisions at the December meeting? I knew that this would be an uncomfortable session. I was nervous about it and just wanted to get past that part of the meeting quickly. Do you think this is what made me seem controlling to others -- that I was just shoving ahead as quickly as possible?"

While some people start with conclusions ("you are controlling") that require you to ask about behaviors. Others may share the behaviors but be reticent to talk about, or even unconscious of, the conclusions that are being drawn. Feedback comes as a report out of the sensory data, as if on video-tape, with the assumption you will understand what that means. For example, you may hear something like this:

>"Well, one thing I've seen is that your door is closed a lot. You come out and are on your way to another meeting outside the department almost immediately. When you come back you go into your office right away, and the door closes again."

The feedback provider may feel that hearing this, you should just "get it." But what it is you are supposed to get is not actually clear. In these instances, instead of asking for examples, you about the conclusions that are being drawn.

>"I see," you might say, "so I am in a closed office, go to a meeting someplace else, and go into my office closing the door again when I come back. *How is that being interpreted by people? What do they say about this?*"

Don't guess, because it may quickly become a guessing game. Leave a little uncomfortable silence. Perhaps come back to this point later, if need be.

>"I guess," the messenger may say, "you seem too busy for us. Like you are kind of above us all."

When statements of this kind occur, which are interpretations and conclusions, the best thing to do is paraphrase them before trying to respond:

>"So when people see me in a closed office, then rush off to a meeting, and them come back to a closed office they draw the conclusion that I think I'm better than them or don't need them, is that it?"

Now you can go further to test this data.

>"That sounds to me like I am being viewed as a kind of arrogant. Am I getting this right?"

Tone is so vital to these questions and paraphrases. In order to successfully carry off such a conversation, there cannot be a hint of sarcasm, belligerence, or offense. In fact, to the contrary, this is exactly a moment to express gratitude.

> "Wow, that's a painful observation for me to hear, Sheri. And I am grateful that you are sharing this with me in an open way. These are exactly the things I need to hear."

What To Do With the Data

Following discussions to get feedback, the next step is to search for insight. First, isolate out the perceptions people have told you about. Then describe the behavior that stimulated these perceptions. Do this on paper, writing out your thoughts and feelings and allowing a certain amount of soul-searching. Ask yourself some hard questions:

> "Why do I tell jokes that are a bit off-color when I'm in new company? This has given me a reputation as being sexist and part of the "old-boys network. Why do I do this?"

> "My efforts to give other people what they want is leading to a perception that I don't have a clear vision and won't stand up for what I believe. To what extent is this in fact true?"

> "Others suggest I'm coming across manipulative because each contact feels like a sales call. What are the alternatives for me in how I approach other people?"

What is important about this stage is to give it some time. Too often we rush from data to action steps without the "soak time" necessary to really understanding *why* the patterns exist. This is challenging work and some of it occurs outside our conscious awareness. The best advice is to take the data to a quiet place and give it your full attention. Write down what you think the patterns are and why they have become a part of you. Then let it rest for several days. Come back to it. Look at what you've written and allow your mind to seek its own answers. Sooner or later, something will come to the top, as the following examples illustrate.

> The president of an organization, after some time considering the patterns in his feedback, discovered that he was really operating from a fear of failure. His metaphor was that of a tightrope. He said he'd been so afraid of falling he was no longer going forward. And he could see that this paralysis, if it continued, would cause the very thing he was afraid of.

> The head of a staff operation began to see the connection between her overwork and her employees feeling disconnected from her. She cared about her staff and didn't want to overload them, so she tried to do it all herself. But this left them feeling out of touch, *un*cared for.

The deputy of a government agency found that he blew up when he feared others were incompetent. This, he discovered, reflected his concerns about his own competence as a leader more than an actual lack of skills among those who reported to him.

This level of self-analysis can be greatly helped by colleagues, friends, and professional helpers, such as therapists or psychologists. Working through this data with others who are willing to listen and to serve as a continuing source of information can be an enormous boon to understanding what heretofore has been a mysterious part of interactions.

And it should not be the stopping point.

What To Do With Insight

The next step is to use the feedback to develop a plan of action for change -- a personal development plan. A general plan may have four parts:

A summary of the insights gained from the feedback

Some proposed changes in behavior

What has to happen so that the proposed changes in behavior are possible

A process to guarantee follow-up and ongoing improvement

These parts do not have to be extensive, but they should be meaningful. There is no standard format or content except what it takes to create the changes you want. It may be bullet points or a longer narrative, whatever is most helpful to you in knowing what you want to do and then doing it.

A comment on the third part, about "what has to happen so the proposed changes become possible." This part is often where real change occurs. For example, as a result of the feedback, you may decide that you want to spend more time with your staff. But this may require that you revamp your time management system, change your calendar, and re-instruct your assistant as to the calls and callers who have priority. Without attending to the third part, the action step called out in the second part, to spend more time with staff, has little chance of actually getting off the ground.

"Have I Got It Right?"

Just having put something down on paper may feel like a great accomplishment -- and it is. But one additional step can make the feedback process much more rich and give you an even better idea of how to direct your personal growth and change.

That step is to take your plan back to those who gave you feedback in the first place and ask the question, "Have I got it right?" This second opportunity for feedback can have benefits that go far beyond simply checking earlier communications. Your work on your personal development plan is evidence of your desire to improve -- and this by itself can help improve relationships in the eyes of others. On this second pass, it is almost always the case that people are even more open. And generally they are quite impressed with the effort of the person who received the feedback to make sense of it and change because of it. You not only get additional data with which to refine your plan but in the same stroke actually improve the trust level of the relationships you are concerned about. This, in turn, nurtures long-term change.

Now What?

Now you must act on the plan you have carefully developed. This may be the toughest part because all the good intentions in the world may not add up to real improvement. It may be useful to keep in mind that responding to feedback is a little like skiing. Because you know you are incorrectly shifting your weight when you turn does not mean that you will really have the feel for doing it right. You are still likely to fall for awhile until that "feel" is acquired through practice.

Now more than ever is the time for great patience as you work at the intended shifts in behavior. Going back to others and continuing to ask for feedback as you try the changes is critical. Being open about "falling" and continuing to try is essential. As you can see improvement and as others can see it, celebrate your incremental successes. Don't get mired in self-accusations over your mistakes. Just push on, giving yourself time for further evaluation and reflection as you proceed.

At some planned point in the future take a few moments to reflect back on your improvements and ask what additional steps you now need to take. Improvement is an unending act of personal development. Your success in the past should energize you to continue along your chosen path of growth and change.

For further information about this process, please contact Dan directly:

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