How to Give & Receive Feedback

In the 4th Industrial Revolution Era

Laura Lozza

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IN THE 4TH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION ERA

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PREFACE

Feedback exchange, or more precisely **the ability to exchange constructive feedback**, is quickly becoming a **key leadership skill** in the 21st century organization.

As we enter the Fourth Industrial Revolution Era, the business world "as we know it" is rapidly changing and this is dramatically affecting the role of human capital within organizations. The most significant shift that we are witnessing in this area is the gradual ditching of retroactive performance appraisals in favor of more proactive engagement and development strategies. Led by some of the most successful firms in the world, and often referred to as the Performance Management Revolution, this transformation affects all areas of compensation, collaboration and training, but especially the way we exchange feedback. No longer an infrequent and top-down (almost parent-child) discussion focused on correcting weaknesses, feedback is now viewed as a continuous adult-to-adult tool for exchange and learning.

Building a **Constructive Feedback Exchange Culture** has two paramount benefits:

- It encourages development and forward thinking, which helps boost innovation
- It builds engagement, which tremendously boosts productivity

Unfortunately, the word "feedback" has a poor reputation; when we for example hear that "John got some feedback" we immediately think that John was "whipped" by his boss/client/wife, and we probably feel sorry for John.

Managers have traditionally been expected to provide feedback to their associates, yet they have seldom been properly trained to do so. The ability to provide constructive feedback has often been "under-appreciated, under-utilized and, in many organizations and individuals – under-developed"[1]; poorly delivered feedback has inevitably – and more often than not – generated resistance and defensiveness, making the feedback hardly ever useful.

The poor reputation of "feedback" also stems from it misuse in Traditional Performance Management. Most everybody who has worked within an organization is familiar with the always-hated Yearly Review, the moment in the year when performance is appraised, rated and ranked; this is often the only occasion when some feedback is provided, supposedly with the intention of "improving performance". What typically happens in these situations is that the focus is on the past rather that on the future, (hence it is easy to reprimand and criticize rather than to have a future oriented dialogue about development): also, the rating and ranking part seems to infer that the people being appraised are commodities, rather than unique talents (hence there is very little space for appreciation of personal strengths, special skills and original contributions).

This book is intended to:

- Help **correct the negative perception about feedback**, in order to properly apply feedback with the intention of building engagement, strengthening performance and creating positive relationships;
- Provide some context about the **importance and benefits of creating a "Constructive Feedback Exchange Culture"** (including an updated perspective about the Performance Management Revolution that many organizations are undergoing today);
- Offer **simple tools and a no-nonsense 7-Step Method to help give and receive feedback** in a way that is truly useful; this methodology includes guidelines for developing the related skills of courageous assertiveness, active listening, personal resourcefulness, self-confidence and respectful communication.

1   FEEDBACK EXCHANGE IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS

The Fourth Industrial Revolution[2] is happening and is rapidly changing the way we live and work.

The 2016 Report about "The Future of Jobs" issued by the World Economic Forum[3] outlines how the Industrial Revolution period that has just begun will impact the skills requirement for employment.

Two mega-trends are already evident:

1. The Disappearance of Purely Executional Functions will open **limitless opportunities to liberate workers from routine tasks**, and to unleash their creativity, leading to significant improvements in both output and job satisfaction.
2. On the other side, with traditional jobs and functions disappearing and new ones fast appearing, workers will need to **acquire the ability to quickly adapt, learn new skills and build the resilience** to deal with change and ambiguity.

This will place an **enormous emphasis on the role of people development**: it is unimaginable to address the development needs of the future workforce in such a fast changing context by using the current approach; a couple of formal training courses, a yearly performance discussion and irregular poor feedback would no longer suffice. Actually, not focusing on a more comprehensive and frequent set of learning and development strategies might be the kiss of death for many organizations.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution carries with itself the paramount need to change the way we think about both Performance Management and Talent Development.

We are transitioning to a **new Era in which we need to reassess and redefine the role of humans** in a world of advanced and fast-changing technologies that not only control, but also learn. The new Era will need a human workforce able to make critical decisions fast, collaborate effectively, and co-create.

The Transition to this new Era has already started and it is highly educational to examine what happens with the pioneering companies that have already jumped on the new train by starting to revolutionize their organizations, business models and people strategies.

1.1   THE PIONEERS OF THE NEW ERA

Organizational structures start to change. Classical hierarchies – built on the assumption that only a few must decide, the vast majority must execute and some in the middle must discipline and control – start to crumble everywhere.

Now that the majority of jobs are no longer purely executional, frequent changes require flexibility ahead of control, and internet-educated generations refuse to be micro-managed, **we notice how collaboration and interpersonal relationships need to change from top-down to peer to peer, with trust replacing controls, and team performance replacing individual egotistic goals**.

Some of the most successful companies are already ditching the traditional hierarchical way of thinking, and rather focus on an entirely different approach, e.g. creating flexible, adaptable, decentralized and **empowered networks** while keeping an aligned strategic intent. **Google** and **Apple** are often cited as main examples with higher productivity and faster innovation than the rest of the market, but many others are quickly following across all sectors. Even the usually conservative financial sector has its "New Era Star": **Svenska Handelsbanken** delegates key decisions to completely independent decentralized entities – a revolution in the banking world – and they consistently enjoy higher equity return than the average of their competitors as well as more satisfied customers[4].

Empowered networks are much better suited to deal with frequent changes than traditional hierarchies: unencumbered from control and bureaucracy, they can promptly learn and respond to changed situations, they can fast develop innovative alternatives and they can more easily remain open, flexible and alert to detect any further changes.

But reorganizing in a flat matrix with cross-functional project teams is not per se sufficient, unless companies make a significant effort to change the culture. In order to truly empower the decentralized teams, the essential ingredient is a **trust-based approach**. As described by F. Laloux in his book "Reinventing Organizations"[5] the future will see a switch from the "Orange or Fear-based Organization" (bureaucratic, focused on compliance and efficiency) to the "Teal or Trust-based Organization" (agile, focused on productivity).

The concept of "trust-based" may sound like just nice words, but it is an approach that carries with it serious and often-dramatic consequences, like the **elimination of several layers of middle management positions** earlier dedicated to control and compliance functions. In the US alone, excess management currently costs an estimated $3 Trillions per year![6]

Take the example of **Netflix** that has completely removed the expenditure control functions, based on the belief that employees have the best interest of the company at heart, and is among the brilliant examples of companies that manage to be 40% more productive than average[7].

Along with these major cultural and organizational changes, we are witnessing the start of another major revolution, the Performance Management Revolution.

1.2   THE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REVOLUTION

For several decades, business organizations and leadership researchers have been seriously questioning the real business value of the Yearly Review, with its related rating-and-ranking sagas; with the gradual disappearance of purely executional tasks, the need to develop talents beyond functional skills has consistently increased, carrying with itself the need to have better developmental discussions, independent from the appraisal. Yet, the majority of organizations continue to rely on annual performance discussions that focus more on past performance than on development opportunities.

Things are changing fast, though. In the last 15 years – following the 2012 shocking announcement by drugmaker Colorcon of their conversion from annual reviews to instant feedback – more than one third of U.S. companies have **abandoned the traditional Performance Appraisal** in favor of a different approach to Performance Management and their experience testifies of major engagement and productivity advantages[8].

This "Performance Management Revolution" is taking place in all types of organizations, not only the typically non-traditional Google and Apple or the high tech companies like Dell, Adobe, Microsoft, and IBM, but also some more traditional firms like GE and Cargill, as well as professional services like Deloitte, Accenture and PWC.

The difference between the Traditional Performance Management approach based on Past Performance Appraisal and the Modern Performance Management based on Current Performance Development is quite fundamental (see also Table 1):

- **Performance Appraisal** (PA) is the systematic process of documenting, evaluating and rating the **past performance of an individual**. PA has long been part of a meritocratic compensation philosophy that includes financial rewards and punishments (the old "carrot and stick" method) as well as linking career progression to past performance. There are many faults in this approach. For one, the "carrot and stick" method has long been proven counterproductive in any but the most basic routine tasks, seriously affecting motivation.[9] Second, using promotions as part of "rewards for past performance" encourages short-term and ego-centered behaviors that are not in the best interest of the company. A third weakness of the system is the difficulty to assess skills consistently (e.g. assessing "strategic thinking" depends on the "strategic thinking" understanding and ability of the assessor[10]). But the most important fault is that all the **time and attention dedicated to examining the past** (= cost!) detracts from putting attention, time and energy towards improving current performance and grooming talents for the future (= investment!).

- **Performance Development** (PD) is an entirely different ball game. Moving to this new approach requires a fundamental modification of the way we consider our human capital, or better a Mindset Shift: Specifically, i.e. **a shift from an Abundance Mindset to a Scarcity Mindset**. The Traditional Approach assumes that "we get what we get when we hire" and then we use Appraisals to "keep the good and get rid of the bad" as we move along; this might sound like a brutal way of describing it, but conceptually it is not far from reality. With the Modern Approach we believe that most anybody can progress to contribute at their best through **effective coaching, frequent feedback exchange and encouragement to seek intrinsic rewards like personal growth and a sense of contributing to a common purpose**. Two of the key implications of this approach are the focus on individual strengths vs. weaknesses and the focus on team achievement vs. individual achievement. The compound effect of these two translates into cultivating the values of **Skills Complementarity and Aligned Collaboration**. The net result is **increased productivity** (which is different from improved efficiency, as we will discuss in the next section): "Regular conversations about performance and development change the focus to building the workforce your organization needs to be competitive both today and years from now.[11]"

It is worth mentioning that the Performance Management Revolution also involves a different approach to Compensation. This has been – and still in many cases is – one of the key hindrances to the adoption of the new approach. How is compensation decided without Ratings and Rankings? Deloitte established a sound precedent based on a thorough investigation[12]; since Compensation is not part of this book, we defer to the Deloitte study for more information on this subject.

	Traditional Performance Management based on Appraisal of Past Performance	Modern Performance Management based on Current Performance Development
What is it?	A Meritocratic System focused on appraising past individual performance and based on the assumption that "carrot/stick" measures can help improve performance by fixing weaknesses	A Strategic Process focused on creating team accountability and individual ownership of own development, by leveraging on skills and learning to calibrate impact with intentions via regular and instant feedback exchange
Attitude to Human Capital	Abundance Mindset	Scarcity Mindset
Nature	Inflexible	Flexible
Owner	HR	Every Manager and Every Employee
Frequency of Feedback	Annual	Continuous
Focus of Observations	Quantitative Measures	Qualitative Learning
Corrections	Retrospective	Prospective
Type of Tool	Operational	Strategic
Drives Engagement?	No	Yes
Drives High Performance?	No	Yes
Business Goals Apply To	Individual	Team
Skills and Capabilities	Pre-defined, On-Size-Fits-All	Bespoke, One-Size-Fits-One
Key Tools	Classroom Teaching, Standardised 360s, Annual Feedback, Comparative Ratings and Rankings	On-the-Job Feedback Exchange, Individual and Team Coaching, Interactive Training
Personal Performance Focus	Weaknesses	Strengths
Compensation Process	Lengthy (based on reached consensus of several management levels, not directly involved with the work, contribution and impact of the compensated person)	Streamlined (based on recommendation by empowered team where each compensated person works, contributes and impacts)
Key question in compensation discussion	What do we think about this person? (evaluation)	What should we do with this person? (proactive interest)

Table 1: A comparative table of traditional and modern Performance Management

1.3 PRODUCTIVITY OR EFFICIENCY?

The terms "Productivity" and "Efficiency" are often viewed as synonyms, hence used interchangeably. Yet, they actually represent two very different concepts, which have entirely different implications from a strategic standpoint, as recently pointed out by Michael Mankins, CEO of Bain&Company[13].

According to Mankins, "Efficiency" is about *doing the same with less,* while "Productivity" is about *doing more with the same.*

There is and important implication of this distinction: the focus on efficiency that produced solid results in the last century is no longer serving the needs of today's organizations. The new "secret of success" is productivity. In simple terms:

- In a steady situation, it makes sense to work on perfecting the routines of doing the same, in order to lower costs and increase profits;
- In a fast changing situation, instead, adapting and evolving is much more important than insisting on optimizing.
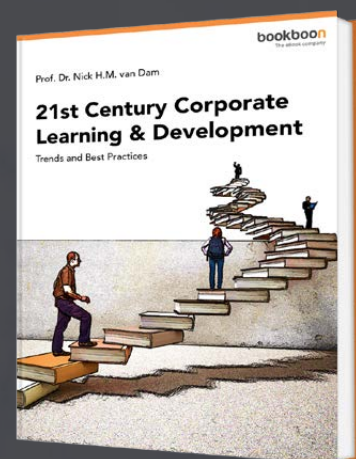
Why is this important in the context of Performance Management? Because the tradeoff of efficiency is bureaucratic control, and bureaucratic control is in the way of productivity

> *At a time when so many companies are starved for growth, senior leaders must bring a productivity mindset to their business and remove organizational obstacles to workforce productivity. This view differs substantially from the relentless focus on efficiency that has characterized management thinking for most of the last three decades, but it is absolutely essential if companies are going to spur innovation and reignite profitable growth.*
>
> **– Michael Mankins, CEO of Bain&Company**

With a Productivity Mindset, Performance Management can be improved by including the following organizational strategies:

- Reduction of the bureaucracy that limits productivity (according to Bain&Company, the average company loses more than one day/week in "organizational drag"[14]).
- Improved deployment of "Star Talents" (ca. 15% of employees in any given company is an A Player; the companies that cluster them together outperform those who don't by at least 40%[15]).
- Investing in fostering Inspiration and Engagement. "People have huge amounts of discretionary energy that they can devote to the work, but are not sufficiently inspired to do so"; when they are inspired, "they are 125% more productive than an employee who is merely satisfied."[16]

1.4   PERFORMANCE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEW ERA

In the previous sections we discussed how the emergence of new Era (the 4th Industrial Revolution) increasingly requires an **engaged workforce with strong skills of resilience and agility**, and how a traditional approach to Performance Management is ill suited to support the necessary skills and engagement training.

Shifting to the "believed-more-effective" Modern Performance Management requires dedicated investment of attention, adoption of new principles, and a redesigned approach to people development.

In these early days of the Performance Management Revolution, we start to learn what works and what does not work. The following 3 Principles appear to be the fundamental Pillars on which to base the new approach, as shown in Table 2:
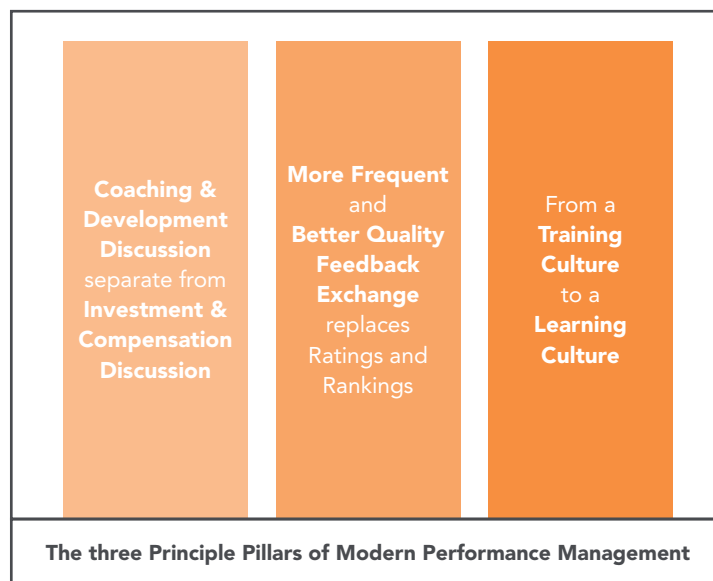
<table>
<tr>
<td>Coaching & Development Discussion separate from Investment & Compensation Discussion</td>
<td>More Frequent and Better Quality Feedback Exchange replaces Ratings and Rankings</td>
<td>From a Training Culture to a Learning Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td colspan="3">The three Principle Pillars of Modern Performance Management</td>
</tr>
</table>

Table 2: The 3 Principle Pillars

- **The Number 1 Principle Pillar in Modern Performance Management is the need to disconnect the Development Discussions from the Compensation Discussions**. Attempts to separate the two within the traditional approach always failed because of the intrinsic vice of the retroactive assessment, where development was inevitably linked to a failure to reach certain goals and related weaknesses, a rather demotivating standpoint for any progress. Thus the real Performance Management Revolution is first of all the separation between Coaching for Performance and Investing in Performance.[17] How to carry on the "Investment and Compensation" discussion is not the specific subject of this book and we simply defer to two examples: the earlier mentioned approach suggested by Deloitte[18] or the less revolutionary approach suggested by SAP[19]; whatever approach we may choose in this area, and with the understanding that ultimately there is a connection between the two, **the "Investment and Compensation" process must be viewed as clearly separate, if not totally independent, from the "Coaching and Development" process.**

- **The Number 2 Principle Pillar is to continue to let people know how they are doing**. The key question is: when ditching the usual Performance Appraisal, what will replace it? Numerous are the examples that show how shifting from evaluating to developing employees can greatly improve engagement, productivity and ultimately business results (e.g. GE and Accenture)[20] but there have also been many failures. In order to be able to reap the benefits of the new approach, **ratings and rankings must be replaced by frequent and more skilled Feedback Exchange**. Simply removing the evaluation without increasing both the frequency and the quality of Feedback Exchange seems to decrease both productivity and overall performance, according to a study by advisory firm CEB[21]; **although virtually everybody hates being appraised, it appears that not knowing how we are doing is even worse**.
- **The Number 3 Principle Pillar is to redesign the way we think about Learning and Development Tools**. Specifically, we need to shift from a Training Culture to a Learning Culture. We used to think of training as teaching events, where people were gathered in a classroom to be more or less indoctrinated, according to whatever decision was centrally made for them. In times **when Efficiency was on the agenda**, it was of course essential for a **centralized HR to carefully select the most cost effective toolkit of standard training** to get as many employees as possible trained at the lowest cost. But in a Productivity Perspective, things need to be different[22].

Training Culture	Learning Culture
The focus is on Efficiency	The focus is on Productivity
Event based	Continuous
Instructor Centered	Learner Centered
Learning assumed happening at Event	Learning expected happening on the job
Centrally Organized	Decentralized
Disconnected from the day-to-day	Embedded in the day-to-day
ROI based on cost vs. attendance	ROI evaluated based on real impact
Owned by HR Department	Owned by Employees and Managers
Learning is Siloed	Learning is Shared

Table 3: Comparative Overview of Training vs. Learning Culture
(Compiled by Laura Lozza based on S. Gill's model)

2 DEFINING FEEDBACK EXCHANGE

Feedback Exchange (FE) is a broad concept. We could easily say, in very general terms, that FE is an **essential element of how we understand, learn about, and improve the world around us.**

The process of seeking, obtaining, responding to and acting upon feedback allows us to verify theories or hypothesis, improve a product or a service, fine tune a design, achieve accurate control of a process or a technology, find the best treatment for a disease, and much more. Examples are:

- ○ Productive Peer Discussions about a new scientific theory
- ○ Expertly Facilitated Focus Groups around a new product
- ○ Systematic Try and Error testing of a new technology
- ○ Constructive Strategic Discussions around a new business model

Note that all these examples assume the involvement of more than one person in the learning process as well as a dedication to keeping an open mind, without which there is no real learning.

Interpersonal Feedback Exchange (IFE) is a particular type of FE, which allows us to **learn about ourselves, so that we can develop and grow**. As we learn about ourselves, IFE can also help us improve interpersonal communication and collaboration.

Specifically on the aspect of communication, **IFE is meant to promote self-refection and insights**, it occurs when people "share, with each other, their personal reactions and insights about one another"[23] and as such it is often used in counseling, typically aided by external facilitation, to encourage a proper (respectful and open) use of the process. "These exchanges should focus on observable and specific behaviors, while considering the readiness and openness of the receiver" as explained in the 2013 Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy.[24]

In this book however we are specifically concerned with the "Why, How, What" of **Interpersonal Feedback Exchange in Modern Era Business Organizations**. Although many of its principles are equally applicable to other social contexts (e.g. academic, teaching, parental, the already mentioned counseling), the business context of our interest calls for some unique considerations, given the **historic misuse of the word and the concept of "feedback" in traditional people management.**

Let us first look at how IFE was used, if at all, in the traditional organization, before we examine its role in our Modern Era.

a. **In a traditional business context**, Interpersonal Feedback Exchange has rarely been used; preference typically falls on a simple **"top-down and one-way Corrective Feedback"** where the HR and senior management would "a priori" define the performance criteria and then each manager would compare each employee against said criteria (sometimes called skills or competences, but often a mix of functional abilities, interpersonal behaviors, attitudes and preferences) in order to find faults or weaknesses that would normally become the manager-imposed "development areas" of focus. Even in the few cases when an exchange was attempted, it often resulted in a debilitating list of justifications, rationalizations or excuses on both sides. In spite of the occasional improvement, **"top-down and one-way corrective feedback" seldom produced positive effects**.

RESEARCH: A too often ignored study[25] published in 1996 rigorously examined the effects of Feedback Interventions (FI) in a number of situations, across 100 years of documented findings, concluding that (although on average FI improved performance) **more than ⅓ of FI actually resulted in decreased performance!** *Interestingly, although the study only examined "task related" FI (i.e. it excluded interpersonal behaviors), it included both objective criteria (e.g. "you need to type at least 100 words per minute") as well as management's subjective preferences about the "how" (e.g. "never use the thumb when typing" irrespective of whether the individual person's use of thumb was preventing or not the achievement of the minimum number of words). The final conclusion of this study may not surprise us today, but was baffling in 1996:* **FI was increasingly less effective higher up in the hierarchy, and specifically when the FI involved "the self rather than the task"!**

COMMENT TO RESEARCH: **Today we intuitively understand and accept the need for each of us to follow our inclinations about "how" we do our job or perform a task***, as long as we remain accountable for the outcome that we have committed to, and as long as we break no laws. We fully understand how an intervention aimed at correcting our own personal inclinations or decreasing our freedom to choose the method that we prefer, can be perceived as a form of disrespect that might in turn negatively affect motivation and engagement. Still, as we all know, the reality is that many managers still fail to respect this very simple aspect in their feedback and continue to apply Corrective Feedback to "the person rather than the person's choice of action" (e.g. "you are verbose" as opposed "you relate many details"). See some examples in Table 4.*

EXAMPLES OF Feedback about the Person	EXAMPLES OF Feedback about the action
You are Verbose	You used many words in your presentation
You are Impatient	You move ahead fast when others are not yet ready
You are Messy	You have made quite a mess in this office
You are Forgetful	You forgot a number of key items
You are Imprecise	There are several imprecisions in this report
You are Careless	You did not take care of some important aspects
You are a Poor Listener	You did not listen to the whole message several times today

Table 4: Examples of Feedback about the person or the person's action

b. **In the Modern Era,** with purely executional routine tasks delegated to technology, **Interpersonal Feedback Exchange cannot be of a corrective nature, but of a developmental nature.** Table 5 shows a comparison between the typical characteristics of **Corrective vs. Developmental Feedback**.

Importantly, a truly useful Developmental Interpersonal Feedback Exchange cannot be an evaluation; however, as will be discussed in the next sections, it is hard to get rid off the "old habit" of adding a subjective evaluation around the "how" in an Interpersonal Feedback Exchange.

	Traditional Feedback	**Modern Feedback Exchange**
Intention	Correct	Learn and Develop
Focus	Past Weaknesses	Current Strengths and Future Opportunities
Relative Power	Asymmetric	Symmetric
Criteria	Standard, Rigid, Set By Managers	Bespoke, Flexible, Set By Employee and Manager together
Method	Retroactive and Evaluative	Instant and Observational
Responsibility of Feedback Giver	Dictate Action and Ensure Compliance	Provide Observations and Insights
Responsibility of Feedback Receiver	Act Upon What the Manager Dictates	Capitalize On Learning & Decide Course of Action (including no action)

Table 5: Comparison between Corrective Feedback and Developmental Feedback *(by Laura Lozza)*

Managing a productive developmental feedback exchange is no easy task, but it **is quickly becoming a top priority leadership skill.**

Its importance is paramount, since it has a direct and substantial **impact on engagement, which in turn impacts critical economic influencers like innovation and growth** (source: Gallup).

2.1   ORIGIN OF THE NAME

What thoughts come to your mind when you hear the word "feedback"? If your first reaction is to think of something emotionally or physically stressful, you are not alone. Unfortunately, the word "feedback" has suffered the reputation of being something unpleasant or unwanted from the very beginning of usage.

So, where does the word "feedback" come from?

German inventor and physicist Karl Ferdinand Braun is usually credited with the first known use of the word "feed-back"; his seeding work and patents on wireless telegraphy earned him the 1909 Nobel Prize in Physics, that he shared with radiotelegraph's first developer, Italian Guglielmo Marconi.

The concept of feeding back an output so to improve the input in a continuous way is a known mechanism of self-regulation that exists in nature and started to be applied in mechanical engineering since the 19th century. But when Braun used it as a word, it was to indicate the undesirable background noise that resulted from the feeding back of a signal in a circular loop in order to amplify it! **From the very start, the work "feedback" was associated with the unpleasant side effect of a useful process!**

In further technical applications, the terms "positive feedback" and "negative feedback" started to be used to describe e.g. a feeding back signal that would respectively amplify the input signal or reduce it; this use spread to numerous disciplines, beyond the technical-scientific field, like economics and social sciences.

2.2   WHY FEEDBACK IS DIFFICULT

In a traditional context, when "giving feedback" is part of an evaluation system, managers are assigned the responsibility to appraise the performance of employees, but often dread doing so, we often hear comments like these:

- It is easy to give positive feedback
- It is difficult to give negative feedback
- We tend to forget to give positive feedback
- We tend to avoid giving negative feedback
- We try to turn negative feedback into constructive feedback, but it is not easy

Nobody seems to like giving negative feedback, so most everybody tries to postpone it or avoid it as often as possible. Also, even if we think and say that in principle it is easier to give positive feedback, we know that in reality we postpone or forget that too. And we often wish we were able to make something constructive out of this task, but very few feel up to it.

We seem to hate feedback. Why?

There is a massive amount of qualitative research around this subject, but unfortunately no single systematic study, since many variables are involved. Let me here list the three most important aspects that consistently emerge from all studies, the **key factors that hinder feedback exchange**:

I.   **Lack of Training**: many feel unprepared to face others' reactions to feedback; when we do not feel sufficiently prepared, we tend to expect and **fear** the worst, so we anticipate being faced with emotional reactions that we do not know how to deal with.

II. **Uncomfortable with Judging**: since the traditional feedback approach is evaluative and corrective, many feel embarrassed, even sometimes deeply disturbed, by the idea of either praising or criticizing another adult human being. Somehow business relationships, albeit hierarchical, do not feel like the right place for **Judgment**.

III. **Doubting its Usefulness**; when we view feedback as "telling another person to change" we may realize the strong **separation** between our wishes on behalf of the person and their freedom to act or not upon our feedback; if they do not, or not fully, or not exactly as we wish, we may feel that we have failed. A usual reaction is to blame it on the system: feedback is useless.

Each one of the three hindering factors is strictly connected with the nature of feedback in the traditional setting. In his book "Reinventing Organizations"[26], F. Laloux clearly states the following: "In many organizations, the feedback process frequently fails because it comes from a place of **fear, judgment, and separation**."

The three hindering factors are therefore **intrinsic faults of the way Feedback is intended and applied in the traditional organizational culture**.

What is the alternative?

According to Laloux: "Feedback given from **love, acceptance and connection** is a nourishing experience that allows people to gauge where they are and to work out collaboratively what they need to do next".

If this statement sounds utopian, it is simply because we try to apply it to a traditional organizational model; it is not utopian at all, it is actually fully possible, and it already works very well in practice within the emerging examples of the Modern Organizations.

Why does a feedback discussion can go differently in a different cultural context? Let's look at one example.

Imagine that you work in an analytical lab, heading a small team of two. One day you replace an old spectrometer with a new model: when the new instrument arrives, one assistant starts to read the manual while the other one ignores the manual and gets busy trying it out. You hardly take notice of their different choice; after all, it is quite normal for people to have different learning styles and preferences. If anything, you are slightly more positively impressed with the one who gets quickly going ("Why waste time with the manual, when it is the same type of instrument as before? The few small changes are probably self-explanatory.") A few days later, however, a new type of instrument arrives, an expensive and delicate new type of gas-chromatographer, and the two assistants apply the same behaviors as earlier noted: one gets busy with the manual and the other one with the direct experimentation. This time, based on your own lack of familiarity with this technology, and your own anxiety about handling this new delicate instrument, you label the choice of direct experimentation as "wrong" and decide to make a mental note of it for the Yearly Review that is coming up in a few months.

Until this moment you had considered the second assistant to be a star performer, she was consistently accurate and swift in producing results, but now you wonder if she is "too swift"; is she taking too many risks? Maybe she is not as accurate as you thought. You start to double check her work and increase control. She feels the increased pressure and gest stressed. Eventually she makes a critical calculation mistake. In the Yearly Appraisal you tell her that she is "careless" and "should put more attention in what she is doing" while pointing at the miscalculation; she defends herself and counter-attacks ("one calculation error can happen to anybody, I simply forgot to double-check; you double-check all my calculations anyhow, don't you?"); you insist that she is always careless and you relate the case of the gas-chromatographer as evidence of wrong attitude. She does not know what you are talking about and you tell her that she should not get so defensive, this is your feedback and you will write "improve attention and be less careless" in her development plan; you tell her you are still keeping her at "meet expectations" but she needs to watch it or else she can fall "below"; it is a shame because for a period she seemed to merit an "above" rating. When she leaves you fill up the recommendation to decrease her ranking and to withhold the bonus, it is actually a good thing not to increase overhead costs, the new instruments are already raising your operational costs. Yet you wonder if you could have done anything different. What happened to this assistant? She was working so well for a period, but if she resists feedback how can she improve? If she could just promise to be more careful! You do hate feedback!

Now imagine something different.

Let's rewind to the moment when you notice her behavior with the gas-chromatographer. You decide to share your concern right away. You tell her about your anxiety about the new instrument, you observe that she has not looked at the manual; you tell her that this worries you and you ask her to be careful. She smiles and reassures you that she IS being very careful; in fact, she knows this instrument very well. Her master thesis had been on a new gas-chromatographic method, using exactly the same type of instrument. But she also tells you that she knows what you mean, she does tend to ditch manuals too quickly, she has actually realized that she had taken a greater risk earlier with the spectrometer, since she is less familiar with that type of instrument and in hindsight she thinks she should have read the manual first. "I have actually noticed that I came close to messing things up with the spectrometer, so I have learnt that with a new type of instrument it might be a good idea for me to check the manual first."

The first part of this example might seem like an extreme case, but it highlights a number of issues that are actually quite common in a traditional context. We can refer to it as "Approach A".

The second part of the example is offered as an initial, hopefully thought-provoking, indication that a more useful alternative is possible. We can refer to it as "Approach B".

	Approach A	Approach B
Manager's Focus in People Management Function	Minimize Risks	Encourage and Enable Great Performance
Manager's Intention in the Relationship with Second Assistant	Collect evidence for Future Appraisal	Enable Assistant to continue to work at her best
Manager's Self-Awareness	Low: attributing own anxiety to someone else's problem, the supposed wrong behavior of second assistant	High: Aware of his own anxiety, due to own lack of knowledge with specific instrument
Manager's Attitude towards Transparency	Low: not saying anything until later and not sharing his own vulnerability (lack of knowledge)	High: instant communication and humble sharing of own anxiety and lack of knowledge
Manager's Attitude towards Integrity	Low: unable to take responsibility for the distressing effect of suddenly increasing control over a star performer	High: giving the benefit of the doubt to a star performer shows coherence
Manager's Relationship with own team	Parent-Child (I know better, can draw right conclusions, and must survey/correct/guide)	Adult-to-Adult (they know better about themselves, but I am in a position to provide additional perspective about some potential blind spots, in case it should help)
How Manager Perceives Own People Responsibility	I am responsible to "make them act and behave as I think they should"	I am responsible to make sure people are in best position to behave and act at their best
How Manager Perceives Business Responsibility	Efficiency: I am responsible to get results at lowest costs from "my people"	Productivity: I am responsible to get the best out of "our team"
Manager's attitude towards people	Mistrust: assuming and expecting the worst unless tight control is applied	Trust: assuming and expecting the best unless trust is intentionally broken

	Approach A	**Approach B**
Manager's attitude towards own team	Application of asymmetric power (Positional Power): my job is to give feedback, your job is to accept it	Application of Symmetric Power (Personal Power): we seem to have two different approaches, there is something for both of us to learn from each other in the best interest of the business and I want to talk about it
On-the-job Effect on Employee	Sudden Increase of Control affects self-confidence, motivation and enagement, creating stress and self-doubts which also affect focus and attention	Prompt and respectful communciation helps boost self-confidence.
Reaction of Employee to Feedback	Defensive	Happy to learn
Outcome	Alienated Engagement of a Star Performer	Star Performer further Encouraged to do her very Best

Table 6: Key differences in traditional and modern approach to deal with feedback (referred to example)

Table 6 above recaps some of the key issues with the way we handle feedback and further helps explain why feedback is so difficult.

The manager in our example is most likely trying to do his/her best according to the instructions and training that he/she has been given, but it is clear that without critically reconsidering the approach, there a risk to make things increasingly worse, in a sort of negative spiral. Mistrust and lack of transparency can seriously affect the possibility to benefit from feedback. Even when given with the best intentions, and even when there is something useful to learn from a different perspective, a "corrective evaluation" simply does not work.

The core of the matter is that the only truth that we can offer as "feedback" is what we observe: the facts, the consequences and how we feel. Anything else is to "infer" hence by definition not "the truth", but only one of the possible interpretations. If we try to pass it for "the truth" we risk to lose credibility and to disrespect the other person.

2.3   BENEFITS OF FEEDBACK EXCHANGE

At this point you probably start to see more clearly how Frequent Developmental Feedback Exchange can be more effective and bring additional value to the business.

Let's recap these key benefits:

1. Frequent Feedback Exchange contributes to creating a Learning Culture where everybody builds the agility, flexibility and resilience to deal with the fast pace of modern business;
2. Frequent Feedback Exchange has the potential to increase Engagement up to three times, according to Gallup, as long as it is of developmental rather than evaluating intent;
3. Frequent Feedback Exchange encourages self-reflection and provides excellent opportunities to practice handling difficult conversations with self-confidence, humble courage and wisdom;
4. Frequent Feedback Exchange promotes a climate of respect in which everybody can thrive;
5. Frequent Feedback Exchange eliminates the hierarchical power unbalance, providing solid ground for mutual understanding, transparency and alignment of intents;
6. Frequent Feedback Exchange focused on the strengths rather than weaknesses can increase productivity.

> *"Efficient feedback facilitates growth and enables people to align what the organization needs with what energizes them."*
>
> – F. Laloux, "Reinventing Organizations"

3 HOW TO GIVE FEEDBACK IN 7-STEPS

As we discussed in the previous chapter, a key factor that hinders the ability to have a useful Feedback Exchange is its evaluative aspect.

Most of us instinctively feel a certain dislike about judging others and most everyone also knows that when someone feels judged the reaction is one of resentment or defensiveness.

Yet, judgment is part of how we instinctively react. We observe something and we "immediately" get an impression of good or bad, right or wrong; we **immediately make a judgment**. This is a **natural pre-conscious reflex that we cannot totally prevent**. What we can do, though, is to be aware of the fact that our reflex is a simple short cut of the brain (e.g. an estimation, a first impression, a possible interpretation), but NOT "the truth*". For a more in-depth discussion about pre-conscious biases, please see Chapter 3, section 3.2 of my book "A Clear Mindset":* http://bookboon.com/en/a-clear-mindset-ebook.

With practice, everybody is able to "suspend judgment" and to simply share our own perspective as "a" perspective, not as "the" perspective. With practice, everybody is able to learn how to share our own perspective in a humble, generous and courageous way, by also encouraging the other person to open up and discuss, for the purpose of mutual learning.

Productive Feedback Exchange happens when there is no judgment, and no advice, just a sharing of observations and an invitation to talk.

In the following sections, we first look into a case study, chosen to represent a rather typical business situation, which can further clarify what it means to provide observational feedback without judgment or advice (Section 3.1), then we thoroughly discuss the difference, implications and consequences of using Judgment or Advice instead of Observational Feedback (Section 3.2) and finally provide a simple 7-steps method to help facilitate the process of Feedback Exchange (Section 3.3).

3.1   A CASE STUDY

Emma is a skilled negotiator who works as Global Sales Director at the multinational consumer good firm ICON PRO. There have been a few rounds of acquisitions and divestitures at the firm, which have also impacted the configuration of the Senior Leadership. Throughout all the changes, Emma has made a point of keeping the management at Key Account Retailer REMI fully up to speed and reassured about consistency of commercial strategy and continuous support by ICON PRO.

Today Emma has invited two REMI top executives to an informal lunch meeting, in order to "continue to keep a good communication flow between our two companies". Joining Emma in representation of ICON PRO will be Ken, the Category VP, and Daniel, a junior Financial Controller that Emma has just assigned to perform a Key Account Evaluation Project, as requested by the new CFO. Emma is concerned about the possible reaction of REMI to this evaluation and wants to ensure that the project is promptly and clearly presented within a climate of continued trust.

Emma thoroughly briefs Daniel ahead of the meeting: he will be introduced and his project will be shortly explained, so that he will be able to interact with REMI executives in the coming months and receive their help in collecting relevant data to perform his evaluation. Emma clearly explains to Daniel that he is welcome to directly answer any questions related to the "what" and "how" of his project, but he must abstain from discussing the "why", which is a delicate subject requiring strong negotiation skills as well as in depth knowledge of the relationship history, including mutual commitments, expectations, and shared concerns; any questions around the "why" shall be handled by Emma directly. Not intending to undermine Daniel's role or intelligence, Emma further clarifies that the risk of any inexperienced negotiator is to inadvertently imply a threat by over zealously explaining or justifying the project; better leave the "why" to someone more expert who does not risk getting lost into too many details. Daniel seems to understand.

At the lunch meeting, Emma introduces Daniel as planned, his project is discussed, general questions are asked and answered in a relaxed fashion, and soon the conversation drifts to other subjects. When the dessert is served, the senior person of the REMI team mentions, like on an afterthought, the oddity of this sudden ICON PRO's interest in evaluating their retailers. In the light of this seemingly casual remark, Daniel starts to make a comment, but Emma promptly cuts him short and, with a condescending smile, offers her own observations about how this is so typical of reorganization periods, how it never ceases to surprise her how many new evaluations of well known parts of a business are requested during periods of change, and how it is simply a necessary but unimportant nuisance. She stresses again her advance gratitude to REMI for helping Daniel collect his data and complete his project. Her scope is clear: reassure and quickly dismiss the issue as trivial.

However, something in the way she has cut Daniel short leaves a lingering sense of unease around the table, that her colleague Ken is quick to detect: he makes a mental note of mentioning it to Emma afterwards. Her intervention has not been as flawless as usual, and Ken keeps thinking about it: he now notices that the REMI executives seem to cast furtive glances at Daniel, as if to check whether he is still bruised by the abrupt interruption or as if they wondered what possibly useful insights Daniel was prevented from sharing.

At the end of the meeting, Ken decides to give feedback to Emma.

Question:

What should Ken tell?

Option 1:

"Look Emma, I want to talk to you about what just happened in there. You should really watch your behavior, you never give space to anybody else, and as usual you cut the junior person short; what's more, you did it in front of external people, and you should never do that; Daniel was really upset that you did not let him talk. And I noticed that the Clients did not take it well."

Option 2:

"What was THAT all about?! You crashed Daniel´s confidence; you have been rude and totally insensitive! That was not a professional behavior! And the Clients got suspicious, so you did more harm than help in there!"

Option 3:

"Emma, I would like to share some observations. I noticed that you interrupted Daniel in the middle of a comment; was it intended? I was quite surprised.

I also thought that the REMI guys seemed puzzled and that Daniel seemed to withdraw, or was it just my perception? That made me worried.

I was actually a bit puzzled because this behavior seemed a bit stressed and it is so "not like you". I am concerned about you. Do you want to talk about it?"

Case Discussion:

1) At first sight, it might appear that **Option 1** is a good choice; but is it? It probably sounds like a ton of similar types of "feedback" that we may have heard one time or other. It sounds polite and after all it does provide useful information.

It does, in fact, some of the observations can really be useful to Emma ("Daniel was upset" and "the Client did not take it well"). However, this is not feedback, it is ADVICE ("you should", "you should never"). More specifically, this is UNSOLICITED ADVICE, which is, actually, a form of disrespect; and it has the aggravation of a generalization ("you always"), which adds a mildly implied coercion, making it sound patronizing.

Emma would have all the reasons to feel irritated, even provoked; and to react with denial or defensiveness.

2) On the other side, many of us would probably have an initial "instinctive" default reaction similar to **Option 2**; this is both understandably natural and actually inappropriate. It is a JUDGMENT and it is blurted out as if it were "the universal truth". Further, it is a JUDGMENT ABOUT THE PERSON. Although Ken has certainly experienced the behavior adopted by Emma as incorrect or inappropriate or even condemnable, labeling Emma as "rude" is actually an attack to the person rather than an opinion about her choice of behavior. This sounds like a rather rude and not constructive criticism.

Emma would have all the reasons to feel insulted and to react by telling him to mind his business.

3) The third option, **Option 3**, is actually an example of CONSTRUCTIVE AND RESPECTFUL OBSERVATIONAL FEEDBACK. It consists of a factual observation (e.g. I noticed you interrupted) and it is offered as a selfless gift to a person, without any attached expectations of provoking a change (because it is up to the receiver to evaluate whether to act upon the comment or not). Ken has also complemented the observation with some potential consequences based on a possible interpretation of other people's reactions (e.g. the REMI guys seemed puzzled and Daniel withdrew). He has also showed genuine curiosity to hear Emma's perspective and offered to talk about it (e.g. did you notice? was that your intention?). In this case, the comment gives Emma the extremely useful opportunity to reflect upon what was observed by others, that she might not be aware of, and to compare it with her own intentions.

So, what was Emma's intention?

Maybe Emma really made a conscious decision to cut Daniel short, after a rapid assessment of the relative risks (Daniel possibly saying something wrong vs. herself possibly looking a bit too bossy); she is fully aware of her actions.

Or maybe Emma simply followed an instinctive reflex based on the surprise ("OMG, we agreed that Daniel would not talk about the "why", but now he does!"); she is not fully aware of her stress reaction.

Using Option 3, Ken gives Emma the benefit of the doubt; he ignores the reasons for Emma's choice and leaves it to her to think about it.

Option 3 gives Emma the opportunity to self-reflect and to respond accordingly (i.e. "I know! It was not the best behavior, but I decided to choose the least risky approach!" or "Oops, thanks for telling me, I was so stressed I did not realize I was losing my composure").

Additionally, Emma can learn something new; whether her behavior was consciously intended or simply a stress reaction, Ken brings an external view that might give Emma more food for thoughts. She might for example say "Actually, thinking about it, now that I see it through your eyes, Ken, preventing Daniel from being fully open was always going to be wrong; if I had to do it again, I would probably decide to be more transparent; I now realize that I have been in a defensive mode about Daniel's project all along! I think I will apologize with Daniel and I will have a new round of discussions with the CFO; this time, I will have Daniel with me, I want him fully in the picture"

As highlighted in this case study, respectful Observational Feedback Exchange encourages self-reflection, provides additional opportunities for learning, and promotes a proactive attitude.

3.2   DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ADVICE, JUDGMENT AND FEEDBACK

As shown in the Case Study, it is important to be clear about the difference between observational feedback, judgment and advice.

Let me offer these definitions:

> **Advice** is "what you would do, if you were in the other person's shoes". But you are not! Unless specifically requested, advice is not usually appreciated. When I offer advice, I assume that "my right way" to do things is "the best way for everybody". No matter our good intentions and no matter our degree of knowledge or expertise about the subject, the other person's right to choose, learn and make own mistakes must always be respected, unless there is a serious danger in sight.

Judgment is "an opinion that we form by discerning and comparing"; as such, it is strictly connected with our own preferences, attitudes and values; as such it cannot be imposed onto others who may have totally different preferences, attitudes and values. No matter how obvious a situation appears to us, all what we can do is to share our own opinion, while making it very clear that it is just one way of considering things. We can never offer our judgment as a final conclusion, else it is a criticism, even if constructive: it is only a one-sided opinion.

Feedback is "an observation, generously offered to another person with the intention of providing additional perspective and insights for developmental purposes". It is meant to encourage self-reflection; it is not meant to induce the person to accept or act upon it, but rather respects the freedom of the other person to decide what to do with it. **Feedback Exchange** is a process in which two or more people engage in sharing and discussing feedback, for the purpose of enhancing the learning.

At this point, we might be asking ourselves a question: after all this talking about letting others learn by themselves, make their own mistakes, and find their own way, based on the fact that our advice is not appreciated, our judgment has no value and neither are likely to truly help, what else is there? What can we offer as feedback?

When we are very accustomed to help by way of providing "advice" and "constructive criticism", **we might find it very difficult to "say what we want to say" in another way; we might feel the discouragement that we may not be able to help, or we may start to doubt the value of our contribution**.

We need not get discouraged: the next section will provide an easy step-by-step method to transform our desire to help in a language that works; as for the doubts about the value we can provide, it might be useful to think about it as **"uncovering blind spots"** as well as **"encouraging to – fully consciously – be the best version of oneself"**.

3.2.1 UNCOVERING BLIND SPOTS

The expression "blind spot" is often used in psychology to indicate something in our perimeter of "mental vision", that we are not able to see or detect, due to some impediments. The often used metaphor of the car can illustrate this: when we sit at the steering wheel of a car, there are several spots around us that we should and would like to see, but cannot, unless we use various "feedback aids" like rear and side mirrors, parking sensors, or a helpful friend using hand signals.

Similarly with our behavior: we only see our behavior from the side of our intention, we need feedback in order to see it from other sides. Unless we get feedback, we might persist in behaviors that are not aligned with our broader purpose (see Table 7). Here some examples:

- My intention is to reassure a colleague that the report I am passing on is really accurate. I have taken great pain in verifying every point, because I know he wants to share the report with an important client and his reputation is at stake; so I tell him about how I have double-checked every input with the various departments and I take him through every step of how I constructed my conclusions. My colleague stops me and tells me "no need for justifications, I trust you"; my own anxiety to do well has made me blind to the simple fact that there was no need to over-reassure the colleague, a simple, "it is double-checked and OK now" was enough; I came across as insecure and needing to justify and there is a chance that he might not trust me as much next time. My **blind spot** is not seeing that the only one who needs reassurance is myself ("the judge in my head" who is never satisfied when everybody else is).

- My intention is to learn as much as possible from a senior manager whom I greatly admire and who gives me the opportunity to have a one-on-one today. I listen carefully, nod a lot and take lots of notes; afterwards I hear her saying to my boss "I thought you said he is a bright talent, but he didn't say a word, he just scribbled stuff, a waste of my time really!" I realize that I was blind to the needs of the other person who had asked to meet me not to lecture me, but to get to know me, she obviously expected a more interactive discussion from a "talent" but instead I gave her my "diligent schoolboy act", a total waste of time for her. My **blind spot** was not seeing or understanding her expectations. My instinctive intention drove me away from the greater purpose of continue to learn from this person by making the exchange worthwhile for both of us.

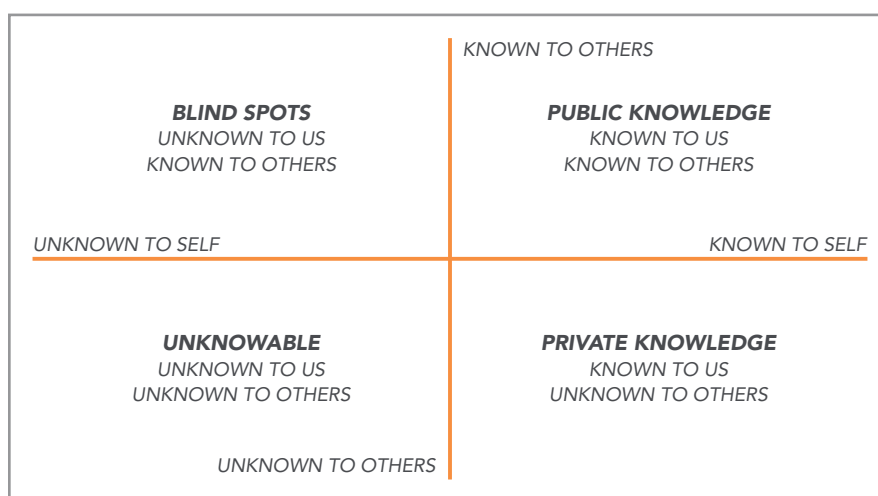|	KNOWN TO OTHERS
BLIND SPOTS *UNKNOWN TO US* *KNOWN TO OTHERS*	**PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE** *KNOWN TO US* *KNOWN TO OTHERS*
UNKNOWN TO SELF	KNOWN TO SELF
UNKNOWABLE *UNKNOWN TO US* *UNKNOWN TO OTHERS*	**PRIVATE KNOWLEDGE** *KNOWN TO US* *UNKNOWN TO OTHERS*
	UNKNOWN TO OTHERS

Table 7: The "Blind Spots"

3.2.2 ENCOURAGING TO "FULLY CONSCIOUSLY" BE THE BEST VERSION OF ONESELF

There is another very important way of providing valuable feedback: it is to help people fully realize how they truly and valuably impact the business, the collaborative relationships, and the shared learning.

This is more than "reinforcing positive behavior" (which is part of the old way of thinking), it is about enriching the understanding of ourselves that helps us be at our best, fully conscious and aware of what we bring to the business and how.

In the traditional context, when feedback was mainly seen as "correction", the focus was on the identification of what could be improved; in the rare cases when comments fell on acquired strengths, capabilities, or contributions, it was still mostly done in the form of advice or judgment.

> **Reinforcing Advice**: Like in the case of "negative" advice, a "positive or reinforcing advice" uses a "should" form, to communicate what you would do if you were in the other person's shoes, e.g. "You should always make your presentations like this one, with simple bullet points" or, in the indirect form "Look at your colleague: you should learn from her how to identify creative solutions to support our clients!"

> **Positive Judgment or Praise**: Like in the case of "negative" judgment, a positive judgment also infers that my opinion is the universal truth, and it makes the other person small (suggesting a parent-child relationship), e.g. "that was a good presentation!" or "I was very impressed, you are very creative!"

> **Feedback** is specific, hence it provides useful information, it substantiates what made the action or behavior truly useful or valuable, including impact and consequences; in this way, the person has concrete elements to re-apply, if needed, the same productive approach, e.g. "the bullet points that you used in your presentation really helped me grasp the key points and I noticed that many who were earlier confused got very excited as soon as your structure helped them see things more clearly"; or "I was impressed by the creativity of the solutions you suggested; it made me realize that I had taken too many things for granted and that I was getting discouraged; now I feel re-energized, I see that it is really possible to solve a number of these issues and I expect that the clients satisfaction ratings will go up".

3.3   THE 7 STEPS METHOD TO GIVING FEEDBACK

This section provides a simple methodology to guide you when you want to learn and practice "giving observational feedback for developmental purposes". See Recap Table 8.

Remember that the general PURPOSE of Feedback Exchange (the "WHY") is to create a Learning Culture, which can foster engagement, transparency, innovation and growth. The specific GOAL or intention, of every specific Feedback Exchange occasion, is to provide an opportunity to learn, develop and grow, based on open exchange of insights. As such, the observation (the "WHAT") must of course be relevant to the business context (more on this, at Step 2).

As for the "HOW", we suggest using the 7-Step Method as a general guideline, to help make the process swift and effective. Note that at the beginning, while learning to apply the process, it might seem to take a lot of time and effort to go through all these steps; of course it takes more dedication than snapping a critical comment or dropping an advice, but as you practice, and as the other person also learns to interact, it actually only requires a couple of minutes at the most. Remember that the goal is not to reach an agreement! So try to KISS! (Keep It Simple and Short)

	"How to give Feedback" in 7-steps	"How to receive Feedback" in 7-steps
Step 1	Ask if it is OK for you to share some feedback	Ensure you select a moment when you have time and energy to give it your full attention
Step 2	State your specific and factual observation, with generosity and without attachment	Focus on the factual observations, ignore the rest
Step 3	Check/enquire about the intention or awareness (Do not assume you know)	Check your understanding (repeat/rephrase/rearticulate)
Step 4	Listen with open mind to the other perspective (no advice or judgment)	Acknowledge the observation (no need to agree, only to accept the other person's view)
Step 5	Share your own impressions, feelings, and assumptions; add thoughts re: potential or observed consequences if possible	If appropriate, share your own initial intention and insights
Step 6	Offer to have a respectful, honest and courageous dialogue (accept a possible refusal)	If appropriate enter a learning dialogue
Step 7	Accept that the decision on how to act upon the feedback stays with the other person (including no action)	Thank the person (no need to communicate your decision to follow-up, or not)
Goal	Create frequent opportunities to learn, develop and grow, based on open exchange of insights.	
WHY	The Purpose is to help create a Learning Culture that fosters engagement, transparency, innovation and growth	
HOW	KISS: Keep It Simple and Short (Using the 7-steps as check list)	
WHAT	Selected "relevant to the business" items.	

Table 8: Recap of the 7 Steps in Giving and Receiving Feedback

Step 1: "Ask if it is OK to share some feedback"

In a traditional context, when feedback occasions are rare, this request is likely to be met with some apprehension. In a Learning Culture context, this is instead usually welcome. Actually, the younger generations, the "Millennials" are exceptionally eager to receive feedback (as reported by Gallup).

In any case, asking is important simply because you **want to be sure that the other person can truly benefit**; if she is in a rush to catch a train or a plane, almost out of the door to get to another meeting, or stressed about finishing another task, she may not be able to benefit, so it is important to provide some context, like "I'd like to talk about your presentation; do you have five minutes now or later today?"

Remember what we discussed about the Performance Management Revolution; Feedback Exchange must be **frequent and instant**, so you will not wait until next month to talk about the presentation, you will ask right at the end of it; gradually, it will actually become a habit to exchange instant feedback right away at virtually every occasion, but you must always ask.

Step 2: "State your specific/factual observations without attachment"

This second step requires that you are as specific and factual as possible. This might seem easy, but it is actually the most difficult step of all. Let me provide this example:

> *Ms. Kordei is a very nice, soft-spoken, and always very composed, middle-aged lady; she works as a Philosophy teacher at a renowned high school and is very much liked by her students. Every day she enters the classroom with a gentle smile, sits on her chair, opens her diary and announces the subject of the day. One morning she surprisingly enters the classroom as a fury, hair in disarray, slams the door behind her, marches to her chair, collapses on it and starts to sob very noisily. The students are appalled. After a couple of seconds, Ms. Kordei gets up from her chair, regains composure, arranges her hair, smiles at the class and asks them: "What did you notice about what just happened?" With one voice the students reply, "You were so upset!" to which she responds "I was not, actually, this is what you infer, not what you observe. The subject of today's lecture is the difference between inference – as in conjecture, speculation, assumption – and what you have actually observed and noticed, the facts – in this case that I was walking fast, slamming the door and sobbing".*

I heard this story from a colleague who had Ms. Kardei (not her real name!) as a teacher; my colleague used it in her workshops to explain the risks of making too quick assumptions about others, especially about their reasons for choosing a certain action or behavior.

So, even if you have your own inference about something, what you state is only your observation.

Examples:

1) "I noticed that you have ignored the input of a key stakeholder"
2) "Our VP was taking a lot of notes during your presentation today, she was nodding and smiling a lot, which is quite unusual"
3) "I have received a number of complaints about missing the deadline for Line 2 maintenance"
4) "I noticed that you have prepared the report using the old format rather than the recently implement new format"
5) "You made two pessimistic comments during today's meeting, that left me puzzled"
6) "I see that you staff this project with extra researchers, although you were initially against it"
7) "I noticed that you are now offering several innovative alternatives to customer service"
8) "I am surprised that you rejected the proposal to invest in a new processor"
9) "I heard that maintenance engineers attend all your production meetings"
10) "I notice that these days your team are spending more time around the coffee machine"
11) "You seem stressed these days, I notice you stay very late at night and I have the impression that you are often in a rush, I have tried to talk with you a couple of time, but you do not seem to notice"

Consider the last example; in this case, a concern is also expressed, but not as a judgment, simply as part of the factual observation; it is totally legitimate to express your own feelings and impressions, as long as this is done in a matter of fact and humble way, as a **generous contribution to help the other person understand his/her impact**, and at the same time without any pretense that your feelings are "universal". In most cases, though, if possible, it is better to add feeling and personal considerations after you heard from the receiver (see Step 5).

Providing feedback **"without attachment"** means that you do not need to be proven right. If you have the impression that the other person is stressed and in a rush, you must be **ready to accept** that he may believe something else; he may claim that he is not stressed or in a rush at all, so it might just be your own inference. This might mean either that the person is simply in a hurry, and you read too much into his behavior, or that the person is really stressed, but unwilling to recognize it or admit it, and your job stops once you have communicated your observation (of course, if the person is in denial and continues to "stress" while creating stress around himself, you will have another possibility to help encourage self-reflection by pointing at the consequences onto others, e.g. "I notice that others around you seem stressed and I am concerned about it"; more of this in Step 5).

Last, but not least, be sure that, whatever it is that you are offering as **feedback, it is truly relevant in the specific context**. For example, while in a fashion context it might be fully relevant and OK to comment on the hair, the make-up or the attire of a colleague or collaborator, the same observations might be totally out of place in a bank. A simple way to mentally check if your comment is truly relevant is to consider the consequences; ask yourself: "Does this action, choice or behavior that I am going to comment about, impact our business?" If you are not able to pinpoint some clear consequences, it might simply be something that is important to you personally, but not feedback material; it is probably a judgment (e.g. "I like the way you dress" or "I dislike your accent").

> ### Step 3: Check/Enquire About The Other Person's Awareness

Since you are not judging, or assuming, this is the moment to be humble and ask whether the person is aware of, or has noticed what you are talking about: this is a moment that requires **genuine curiosity** and the **ability to keep an open mind by always giving the other person the benefit of the doubt**. Whether in your mind the observed fact gives you a positive or a negative impression, this is really the moment to let go of your own interpretation and learn.

So just ask. Maybe the person is fully aware, maybe not.

(Remember the case study? Maybe Emma had made a conscious decision to interrupt Daniel, so when you tell her, she knows what you are talking about and is ready to agree that there were some consequences, some of which not as desirable as she wanted. Or maybe Emma had reacted on the spur of the moment and will need a second or two to reflect about your comment, before realizing that she actually did have an automatic stress reaction.)

Step 3 is especially important when you want to use inputs from others (as in "Your colleagues complain about the difficulty in being heard from you, are you aware of this? And what is your perspective about it?).

A simple way to ensure that the question comes from a place of genuine desire to help, to offer insights that in turn promote self-reflection, is to focus on the choice, not on the person (e.g. "what made you decide to do this?" rather than "why did you do this?"). You may also offer the opportunity to answer in different ways (e.g. "was it meant or did you just forget?" "was it on purpose or not?").

Examples:

1) "I am curious as to whether you ignored the stakeholder comment on purpose; or you did not notice/maybe forgot?"
2) "Did you notice the reaction of the VP? Did you realize that this was an unusual behavior?"
3) "Are you aware of these complaints? Any idea what makes them complain with me rather than discussing it with you?"
4) "What made you choose to stay with the old format, do you see a problem with the new format? Any reason why you did not mention it to me before?"
5) "Did you realize that you made these comments and that they were not really adding to the discussion, except for a hint of pessimism, was it intended? Does it reflect your feelings?"
6) "What made you decide to assign more researchers to this project? I thought you were initially against it. Do you maybe feel pressure from other parts of the organization or did you change your mind?"
7) "Tell me more about these innovative alternatives; what made you decide to add to the customer service portfolio?"
8) "What made you decide to reject the proposal to invest in a new processor?"
9) "Are you intentionally inviting maintenance engineers to your production meetings or is it their initiative?"
10) "Are you aware that you team hangs around the coffee machine longer these days? Is it a new initiative? Is it intentional? Or does it just happen? Any thoughts?"
11) "Is it just me and my perception, or you are really stressed these days? Or maybe you are just busy and I am too much in the way?"

If the above statements seem too long and even pedantic, you are right, of course. They are constructed like that in order to give alternative ideas, but actually, as long as **you have and show a genuine interest**, a couple of words and a smile are often more than sufficient. The most important thing is that you mentally construct this type of question inside your head, that you are fully focused giving the benefit of the doubt to the person. Most of the time you may simply say "Do you know?" or "Are you aware?" while in your head formulating the full train of thoughts (I do not know and I really need to ask; was she aware or not, did she ignore intentionally or not? I cannot presume to know what prompts her choice, instincts or reasons).

This prepares you to the next step of listening with an open mind. You do not really know anything beyond your observation, until you hear the other side of the story from the other person.

<div style="background:orange;color:white;text-align:center;font-weight:bold;padding:1em;">Step 4: Listen with open mind to the perspective of the receiver</div>

Listening is a rare and valuable skill, and a very difficult one to master. We often think that we are listening, when instead we are already planning what to say next.

Listening with full attention, suspending our judgment and focusing on what the other person is really saying – not our interpretation of it – is really hard work that requires training and practice.

First of all, it requires **self-management**: we need to learn to stay focused and to continuously push aside the inevitable thoughts that appear in our head; our brain continuously finds solutions and answers, makes hypothesis and confirms them or disproves them, seeks to understand and to agree, etc. All this is quite normal and as this happens, we just need to gently re-focus, bringing our attention back to the person who is talking.

Second, we need to continue to remind ourselves that **Listening is an ACTIVE not a PASSIVE skill**. Just waiting patiently for the other person to say more, without actively showing your interest and curiosity, without encouraging to say more or to explore deeper, is not really helpful in the context of a learning process.

It greatly helps to use the **techniques of Active Listening**, like:

- **Rephrasing or rearticulating**; e.g. "I see; so you have made a conscious decision to ignore the stakeholder's comment, because you already had addressed it in two previous meetings and you thought it was not a big deal to just let it lie"
- **Checking understanding**; e.g. "If I understand you correctly, you say that the stakeholder had given the same identical input in two other occasions and that you had actually incorporated it in your study; you also kept him informed. So this time you assumed that he just wanted to be sure to mention it again and you thought that your nodding was sufficient to remind him or reassure him, is that so?"
- **Asking Powerful Open Questions:** e.g. "So did you assume that he repeated his input only to have a nod of reassurance from you?" and "Did you consider the possibility that he also wanted to raise the attention of the other participants to his own input?" and "What else did you notice?"

Note: you can find additional suggestions regarding Listening Skills in two other books:

- The 7 Qualities Of Brilliant Executive Coaching,
  http://bookboon.com/en/the-7-qualities-of-brilliant-executive-coaching-ebook
- A Clear Mindset
  http://bookboon.com/en/a-clear-mindset-ebook

Step 5: Share your feelings and the consequences

At this point, it is useful to share more about **your own feelings**, and **even your impressions or inference**. You usually need to wait until Step 5 to do this; you do not want to do it too soon, because you want to give maximum freedom to the other person, you want to encourage him to bring his unique perspective.

Yet, the way you felt and the way you perceived the action or behavior is a valuable insight. The person in front of you might have all the good intentions for choosing a certain course of action, but if that choice gives you a "bad feeling", he needs to know.

Everyone appreciates to learn whether they have the impact that they intend to have, as long as it does not feel like criticism; so when you offer insights in this area you actually give a generous gift: you offer the opportunity to **learn how to better calibrate impact with intentions** (e.g. let's say I want to impress with my thoroughness, but tend to go too far in justifying every data point, so I might give the impression of wanting to be right at all costs; when I receive the feedback that I give an impression of arrogance, I have the opportunity to do something about it, maybe simply adjust the tone from trying to prove/convince to informing/influencing)

Now it is also the moment to concretely link the observation with the business, to make it really relevant. It is the key moment when you must **provide additional insights and perspective about consequences**, both the ones you may have observed or perceived and the ones that are simply possible or that you can envisage; it is the moment to share what can provide useful learning.

For example:

1) "Let me add a perspective: when you ignored the input, and I was not aware of your previous discussions, I got anxious, so I might have given the unintended impression that I was in disagreement with your choice of letting things lie." (Note that you do not say "you should have informed me")

2) "I would really like to stress your accomplishment during the presentation; I have never seen our VP so attentive and impressed; with her support things can now move fast. Also, the way you managed to simplify and clarify that complex subject was very clever, it will help us all stay on track; I have learnt a lot myself." (Note that you do not say "Good work, you did well")

*An important note of caution: **remember to prioritize your comments**! In some situations, especially when you are very experienced in one area and the other person is very green, you may notice a number of facts and relative consequences that provide useful opportunities for learning. However, in order for the learning to take place, the rule of thumb is always to take one thing at a time. Choose carefully your comments and maybe "dose them"; one of the advantages of frequent feedback is that you will have many more opportunities to complement at the next occasion.*

Step 6: Offer to have a learning dialogue about it

This is an optional step.

In some cases it will be appropriate and welcome. In some other cases, the person will express a desire to reflect alone or might even specifically ask to talk it over in another moment.

If you do offer and your offer is accepted, remember that this is a moment for brainstorming; you might be asked to provide suggestions or advice, or you might feel that your advice can be useful and wonder if you should share it; go ahead! It is OK to offer everything you have for the purpose of brainstorming, not for the purpose of "telling her what to do".

You need to make it clear that what you are offering is only given for the purpose of broadening the perspective, adding alternatives; you are happy to provide ideas, so that the person can select what makes sense or is useful for her and what is not.

In this Step 6, you need to use your Coaching Skills.

Note: you can find additional suggestions regarding Coaching Skills in this book:

- The 7 Qualities Of Brilliant Executive Coaching,
  http://bookboon.com/en/the-7-qualities-of-brilliant-executive-coaching-ebook

Step 7: Relinquish control and respect freedom of choice

Step 7 refers to the responsibility of acting upon the feedback.

Let us be very clear: **the responsibility to decide what to do with the feedback, including potentially the decision to ignore the feedback, resides with the receiver and must be respected**.

Only when the receiver decides to accept the learning and chooses to focus on it, you may want to offer your continued support.

If the receiver decides to act upon the feedback, then you can keep the dialogue open. This is actually the most effective type of feedback: to provide specific continuous feedback about a behavior or a skill that the person has decided to focus on. When you know what the person is working on, it becomes very easy and effective to provide **instant information feedback about the specific behavior of choice, in this simple way**:

- "I noticed that you applied the learning and made progress in this situation: e.g. obtaining this positive outcome"
- "I noticed that you missed an opportunity to apply the learning in this other situation"

From Negative Intervention To Courageous And Respectful Feedback

ADVICE: You should not interrupt your colleagues in mid sentence
GENERALIZATION: You always interrupt colleagues in mid sentence
JUDGMENT: It is really impolite of you to interrupt your colleagues in mid sentence
FEEDBACK: I notice that you often interrupt your colleagues in mid sentence
SPECIFIC FEEDBACK: I noticed that you interrupted John three times today
DEVELOPMENTAL FEEDBACK: I noticed that you interrupted John three times today and I am concerned that this might put him off; he appeared quite depressed after the meeting.
RESPECTFUL AND COURAGEOUS FEEDBACK: I noticed that you interrupted John three times today; was it intentional? What do you think was John's reaction? Did you ask him how he felt afterwards? Do you want to discuss your learning from this observation? Is there any learning for you? How could you adjust your behavior in similar situations in the future?

Table 9a: Example of how to rephrase advice or negative judgment into more useful feedback

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From Positive Intervention To Courageous And Respectful Feedback

ADVICE: You should teach your colleagues how to give more space to others like you do
GENERALIZATION: One should give space to others during meetings to hear other opinions
JUDGMENT: You are a good negotiator because you always give space to others during meetings
FEEDBACK: I notice that you often give space to others during meetings
SPECIFIC FEEDBACK: I noticed that you encouraged the junior participants to share their opinion during the meeting yesterday
DEVELOPMENTAL FEEDBACK: I noticed that you encouraged the junior participants to share their opinion during the meeting yesterday; they now appear reassured and more engaged
RESPECTFUL AND COURAGEOUS FEEDBACK: I noticed that you encouraged the junior participants to share their opinion during the meeting yesterday; was it intentional? Did you notice their reaction and the reaction of the others? Could this be done more intentionally in other situations?

Table 9b: Example of how to rephrase advice or positive judgment into more useful feedback

4 HOW TO RECEIVE FEEDBACK IN 7 STEPS

We earlier discussed how most people dislike or even hate giving feedback, at least until we learn to separate the evaluation from the concept of providing generous developmental feedback.

Yet we dislike or hate even more to be given the type of feedback that sounds like an evaluation, either criticism or praise, or anything that seems to come from a higher authority with the implied message that "they" know better.

Before discussing what is the best way to receive Developmental Feedback with the 7-Step Method (in Section 4.2) it is useful to start by investigating our emotional reflexes. In Section 4.1, we shed some light on these reflexes: it is helpful to **understand what makes us react so negatively to criticism and even to praise**, so that we can learn how to best tackle the emotional distress linked with the traditional way of giving feedback, as well as preparing us to better benefit from Developmental Feedback.

In Chapter 3, we looked at the difference between Advice, Judgment, and Observational Feedback, with the purpose of clarifying how to use the latter and avoid the first two.

Let's now look a bit more closely into the **effect of Advice and Judgment from the perspective of the Receiver**.

4.1 UNDERSTANDING AND TACKLING THE EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

We often seem to think that "making mistakes" is something to be avoided; we do not like to think of the mistakes we make; they make us feel bad about ourselves; we therefore dislike it when others "find out". When others do notice one of our mistakes, mention it, and even lecture us about it, we feel ashamed; even when they praise us about something, we suspect that they benchmark it against other things we do that are not worth of praise, hence we may also feel bad about that.

We really believe that mistakes are "bad". Or so it seems.

However, this is actually a misconception.

Think about any types of game or sport activity that you enjoy. Chances are that the best part of the play is actually the mistakes, the try and error, the search for mastery. Isn't it?

Let's take the example of a computer game; as soon as we know how to get through the first level, we lose interest; we need to get to the next level in order to continue to have fun; we need to make mistakes, in order to learn; we need to fail in order to value accomplishment and success. Do we feel bad when Super Mario loses a life? Do we regret letting him fall into the lava and do we hope nobody finds out? Not at all! Are we ashamed if we are found out? Of course not! We can shamelessly play online or in teams and we shall have equal fun with our failures and victories as well as with the failures and victories of the other players.

So why aren't we able to take feedback the same way as when Super Mario loses a life? Why can't we see the try and error as part of the excitement and the challenge as part of the fun?

The reality is that we can, of course, **as long as the feedback is NOT Advice or Judgment. We do not have any problems with learning through mistakes. Everybody is able to enjoy some "try and error" as long as they feel in charge and respected in their own ways to learn. Only then can learning through mistakes be fun and stimulating, exactly like a computer game.**

4.1.1 ADVICE

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, **advice** is "an opinion that someone offers you about what you should do, or how you should act in a particular situation"; **to advise** is to provide advice.

Examples can be:

- "My advice is to sell your old camera and buy a new one"
- "My doctor advised me to get more sleep"
- "With advice and consent of the Senate, this rule is approved"
- "The financial consultant advises to sell my stocks"
- "The counselor gave me good advice for how to handle a family crisis"

Sometimes we may need and seek advice from people that we consider expert, competent, wise and trustworthy. Some other times we may ask a random sample of people in order to brainstorm about possible approaches. Sometimes we pay for the advice (e.g. medical advice by physicians, financial advice by economists or behavioral advice by psychologist), some other times advice is given for free (e.g. by family or friends). But in all these cases, the invariable rule is that advice is always given upon our asking for it.

As earlier discussed, an entirely different story is the **"unsolicited advice"**, i.e. the advice that is offered voluntarily by someone who has not been asked. This type of advice is usually not welcome.

> There are only a few situations when unsolicited advice might be welcome, e.g. when I am about to inadvertently put myself in danger. For example, if I set up to hike on a mountain and a local villager tells me "You should not climb there right now, there is a major storm coming up and announced landslides" I am probably happy to be handed out the information. Or if I set up to swim in the ocean and someone advises me not to swim there, since sharks were just spotted, then I am certainly going to welcome the information and I probably feel grateful.

Did you notice the use of the word "probably" in the above examples? Do you know why we used it? Because we always prefer to receive the (useful) information without the advice: we prefer to be given the freedom to choose our course of action. Had the villager said: "Do you know that landslides are announced in the area?" or the passerby simply informed me that sharks were spotted, I would have felt 100% grateful, and I would definitely postpone the hike or the swim. However, when the unsolicited advice is added to the information, something "strange" happens, something that might appear totally irrational and counterintuitive: we may feel a strong temptation to set up straight for the landslide area or the shark infested ocean "just to show them that I am perfectly able to choose for myself, thank you very much!"

Yes, this is irrational, and yet it is totally natural and human; we have an instinctive dislike for any forms of control, linked to the desire to emancipate ourselves from any forms of control; a necessary trait from an evolutionary standpoint, this reflex might at times prompt us to act irrationally against our own best interest.

We have an instant reflex against even the slightest indication that someone else may wish to control us, irrespective of their best intentions and irrespective of our desire to please or comply.

Here are the most common reactions to unsolicited advice:

- **Unsolicited advice from family members**, e.g. "you should work fewer hours, spend more time with your kids, tell your boss that you cannot take on another project, instruct your associates not to call you during weekends, etc." This type of advice is very tricky because it generates mixed feelings. On one side we have a strong desire to please them and we are afraid of alienating their love in case we disappoint them; on the other side we strongly resist the idea of losing our autonomy and becoming slave of someone else's wishes; we want to maintain love and respect, not be overpowered by an imposing parent, a nagging spouse or overly zealous cousins.

- **Unsolicited advice from a friend**, e.g. "you should really consider going on a diet, you need to take a break from your work-home routines and go out more to have fun, you should be less direct, more talkative, less talkative, date more, date less, be less busy, have more time with friends like me, etc." This type of advice can be quite annoying. Although we tend to value the opinion of friends – after all, that's why we choose them as friends in the first place – we wish that they could hold the advice for themselves; they know us, so they are fully aware of our struggles to keep our weight, find time to have more fun, adjust some of our bad habits and spend more time with them, so why do they have to say it? Don't they trust us? Do the think we need the reminder? Don't they know that it is easier said than done? We expect understanding from a friend, not nagging and useless reminders!

- **Unsolicited advice from your boss**, e.g. "you should speak up in meetings, you should not provide too many details in your reports, you should never openly disagree with top management, you should be more direct, less direct, more diplomatic, more visible, more influential, more like me, etc." Although often intended as "helpful feedback" this is not feedback at all, as we have earlier discussed; and it is not helpful. What the receiver actually hears is something like this: "I am better than you in knowing what you need; you are unable to make a sensible decision for yourself, so I have to tell you exactly what to do". We feel not trusted, criticized, controlled and manipulated. We are therefore very unlikely to benefit from such comments. We also feel at a loss, not knowing what to do, there is no "right way" to react. If we try to follow the advice for a sense of submission to the dominance of hierarchy, we risk betray our identity and lose authenticity (like trying to be outgoing and visible when our personality is reserved and humble). If we argue against it, we risk jeopardize the relationship and are labeled as "defensive". We often think that the best course of action is probably to ignore, although with the doubt that we might be sinking our career or missing an opportunity to learn. (We will see in the next section that there is another alternative)

- **Unsolicited advice from colleagues**; this usually solicits similar feelings as with either friends or boss, with the additional suspicion of competitive manipulation or of being mobbed.

There is no easy way to respond to unsolicited advice; it takes awareness, emotional management, self-confidence, courage and a lot of practice to tackle these comments and transform them into positive dialogue. The 7-Step Method will take you through a practical way to tackle it.

4.1.2 JUDGMENT

As we earlier discussed, judgment is part of an evaluation process, not of a developmental dialogue, because it is a conclusion. When we express a judgment about someone, we evaluate pros and cons about the behavior, attitude, actions, output and impact of a person and offer our own conclusion as "final"; if we have discussed it with others and collected a lot of evidence, we might call it a criticism, while a judgment is usually formed quite quickly based on our own set of beliefs, values, and…biases. The judgment or criticism can be positive or negative, it can be a reproach or praise, but in both cases it is never appreciated or useful as a development tool.

We judge or criticize a book, a fact, an action, an initiative, an idea, but never a person.

Nobody likes to be evaluated, criticized. We really hate it. We hate it even more than we hate advice. Why?

We usually think that the main problem with judgment (or criticism) is that it challenges our own sense of value, or – said in other words – it threatens our self-esteem. Since our brain is hardwired to protect us, it is somewhat easy to understand how we may have an entirely natural defensive reaction in presence of this threat. However, our reaction to judgment and criticism is much stronger than what we could assume from a threat to a high-level need like esteem.

Consider the hierarchy of needs in Marlow's theory (see Table 10): we would expect to react most strongly to what threatens our most basic needs, like food (physiological) and shelter (safety); once these basic needs are fulfilled, we also need a family, a job in which we are appreciated, and finally, as the proverbial "cherry on the pie" also the possibility to fully realize our unique potential. But we expect a less "desperate" reaction to a higher level need than to what threatens our own existence and survival.

When we look at this pyramid, our reaction to criticism may appear out of proportion. Yet, this is simply because a criticism attacks something more than just our self-esteem.
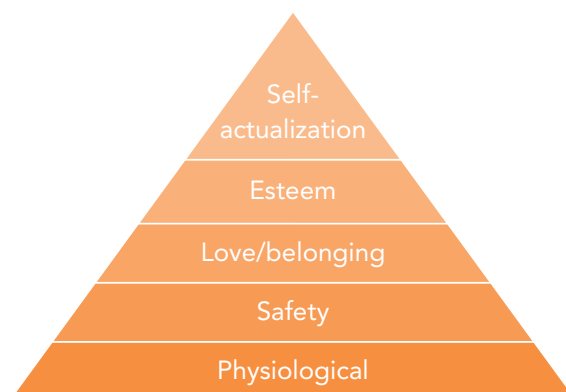

Table 10: The Hierarchy of Needs according to Marlow's theory
(Image by FireflySixtySeven)

The "father of Emotional Intelligence" Daniel Goleman has noted[27] that threats to our esteem in the eyes of others are so potent that they can literally feel like threats to our very survival (from an evolutionary standpoint, being appreciated and respected in our identity guarantees that we are "accepted within the tribe" hence given best chances to survive).

Like in the case of Advice, also Judgment is often given with the best of intentions, yet it is still disrespectful.

Let me just once more stress how it is natural to jump to conclusions, as a background to "the 7 steps of receiving feedback". Understanding that we all face the risk of becoming quickly judgmental allows us to give the other person the benefit of the doubt: it is natural and legitimate to feel insulted by a judgment, but we can still conceive that it might not be meant.

The reason why we are often unaware that we are judging is because our brains hate uncertainty and when it does not have an answer, it assumes and approximates. These short cuts of the brain can at times offer useful intuitions, other times our jumping to conclusions makes us go wrong.

When we are aware of this, we can watch it, and at the same time we can be tolerant with those who jump to conclusions and judge.

Let' s see what happens in a typical case of jumping to conclusion when we risk making a haste judgment on thin ground (I am using a real life case that I recently discussed with the Safety Manager of an Eastern European factory belonging to an international FMCG company, factory that still uses a traditional control and compliance approach).

a. I may notice a certain behavior performed by another person (e.g. a line operator takes a Band-Aid from the first-aid kit and wraps it around one of his fingers, without ticking the box of "small injury" on the safety recording sheet, then takes a second plaster and puts it in his pocket)

b. I may also notice some consequences, and/or imagine possible consequences (e.g. I see that another operator has noticed the same behavior and squints; I am also in a flash aware about the possible future inconsistency between the number of reported accidents and the monthly Band-Aid count)

c. I instinctively compare these observations with similar situations (e.g. I have an automatic reflex of concern or disapproval seeing the worker pocketing an item that belongs to the company and automatically attribute a comment of disapproval to the colleague's squint);

d. Lastly, while all this information is automatically gathered by my brain, I become aware that the fact I observe carries an "evaluation label", and chances are that the label is "this is wrong or bad" (e.g. I "know" that I have witnessed an incorrect behavior)

e. Unfortunately, it is only at this point that I start to rationalize; until this moment my brain has simply formulated a pre-conscious intuition and attached to it a pre-conscious judgment, so it is very probable that I only collect enough evidence to "prove" my initial intuition and judgment, making it "the truth" (e.g. I now consciously believe that the worker has been sloppy and has disregarded the rule to report even the smallest accident, and that he has additionally shown a disregard for company property by stealing a second Band-Aid; although the one who has noticed appeared to disapprove, this is still a bad example and if I do not do something about it, maybe the colleague and everybody else will feel legitimated to ignore or break the rules)

Do you see how this can easily happen? And how this can lead us to feel the need to lecture or pontificate (e.g. talk to the worker about how "it is wrong" not to record the injury and steal)?

Yet let's examine the reality: is it possible that the short-cut taken by our brain does not lead us to a "universal truth" but simply to a "biased view"? What if we have misinterpreted the intentions of the other person? For example, imagine that the worker has an insect sting on his finger; this bothers him when adjusting a certain lever; he becomes concerned that this might hinder the precisions of his movements and decides to use a protective Band-Aid on his finger; in the interest of not losing any additional time, he takes a second Band-Aid should the first one gets worn out during the lever adjustment; it would be incorrect for him to report a work injury because the sting was not a work accident, but it happened the day before at home; his colleague has earlier suggested using a Band-Aid upon his voiced complain, so he squints in approval.

So, while my intuition is natural and legitimate, believing that my negative judgment is "the truth" is incorrect.

The positive or negative is in my mind: the only real thing is what I have observed, and the only person who can comment on the intention is the one who is responsible for the observed behavior.

4.2 THE 7 STEPS METHOD OF RECEIVING FEEDBACK

This section provides a simple methodology to guide you when you want to learn and practice "receiving feedback for learning purposes". See Recap Table 8.

Remember that **there is always something useful to learn** from even the worst type of feedback delivery. The skill that you need to develop is to skim through all the irrelevant and even disrespectful stuff and get out the bit that is useful to you, while managing your emotions and possibly helping the giver to improve their delivery.

To Note: The 7-Step Method below assumes that the Feedback giver might not be correctly trained or fully prepared to provide developmental feedback in the most effective and respectful way, but it is of course applicable in all situations, and it hopefully provides you with a tool to influence the feedback giver so that he or she will also learn.

Step 1: Select The Moment

In order to benefit from the feedback, grasp what can be useful to you, and politely deflect the potentially irritating comments, you need to be in a good place, mentally and emotionally; you need to be able to give it your undivided focused attention; you probably do not need a lot of time, but you do need peaceful time.

So do not hesitate to ask for a quieter moment if the comment is dropped onto you while you are in the middle of something that fully absorbs you, or even to delay or postpone an agreed Feedback Exchange meeting if you feel the need for ten more minutes of breathing space.

Do not delay too much, though, it is totally all right to tell the person "give me five more minutes", or "give me an hour to finish one urgent thing, so I can give you all my attention"; it is less than ideal to delay by one day or more, you do not want the person to ruminate to tell you, you get the best insights from instant feedback.

If you feel stressed, you can do some breathing exercises (like Deep Belly Breathing) or spend a couple of minutes practicing a power position.

Deep Belly Breathing Exercise: sit in a comfortable position, with back and head straight, and feet flat on the ground; place one hand on your chest and one on your belly; inhale and notice how the hand on the chest does not move, while the belly expands and lifts the other hand; exhale via the mouth while gently pushing the air out with the hand on the belly; repeat it a few times until the breathing is regular and then place your hands flat on your thighs while continuing to breathe with the same rhythm, but now exhaling through your nose. This will quickly relax you.

Power Position Exercise: spend two minutes in an open position, no crossed arms, no crossed legs, shoulders rolled back, open chest, no slouching, chin up and possibly a smile on your face or at least fully relaxed jaws. Ideally stand, open arms and legs, looking up. This will quickly inject some positive energy in your body and will help you feel more self-confident.

Step 2: Focus On The Factual, Ignore The Rest

Step 2 is the most challenging and yet the most useful one.

You need to **find one element in what you hear that is or has the potential of being the most factual or most useful one** and **consciously set all the rest aside as if it were white noise**. This is especially important when the feedback comes from an inexperienced, untrained or unaware feedback giver; especially important when the feedback is not really feedback, but advice or criticism/judgment.

Make a mental note of it and continue to focus on it: it is OK to give it a few seconds. For example:

> **You hear:** "That was a terrible presentation you gave, too many details, no passion, you lost everyone, it was boring and unprofessional; you must not come with long lists of numbers, tell a story, next time give us three bullet points; actually, next time ask your deputy to prepare the presentation for you, he is so much more concise; but you need to speak up and excite!"

> **You pick one thing and one thing only to focus on it: e.g.** "He thought there were too many details" or "He thought there was no passion or excitement" or "He was bored".

You want to focus on what the other person is saying from the point of view of what the other person has noticed. You do not yet need to figure out whether the person has noticed something real or not; you must simply assume that something in there is real, but is probably filtered by inference. And you want to understand the other person's perspective, before you start to think about it yourself.

The key point is: do you want to start to worry (about your potential mistakes or the poor impression that you have supposedly made) before you understand what the other person is talking about? Maybe this person was distracted and missed the title of the first slide, so he got lost with the rest of the data; in which case the learning for you would be to remember next time to often remind the audience of title and context, as you move through the data; or it might be that you were truly over-zealous with details, so the learning might be that you can do with fewer data next time.

It is of course essential to resist the temptation to stat defending yourself: putting focus on "what did this person really observed?" will distract you from the initial reflex to counter-attack and by the time you learn more, you will be less instinctive and able to respond more wisely.

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Step 3: Check your understanding

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The purpose of Step 3 is to clarify.

Remind yourself that you do not have a "crystal ball", you do not "read minds" and you do not know what the other person really thinks and feels, until you ask; if you think that you can guess, chances are that your guess is solely based on how **you** think and how **you** feel, nothing to do with the insights that you can gain from the other person. So ask!

Start with the one thought that you selected at Step 2 and try to clarify what the other person really meant. The best way to check your understanding is to **rephrase what you heard, with your own words**. The main advantage is that you can enquire about what you think is really relevant for you and you can use your enquiry to obtain more precise and more factual information. For example, you would not repeat the same vague statement of "too many details" because you still do not know what "too many" means: too many compared to what? So you would for example rephrase in this way:

- "Let me check if I understand: you saying that some of the details were not relevant for this audience, right? I think you also meant to say that we risk to confuse the audience, is that so?"
- "Just to be sure I understand what you mean: you thought that I could make the same point with fewer data, is that it? Or are you maybe saying that some of the information was distracting the attention away from the key conclusions?

When you do this, you are not being defensive, you are not denying or deflecting, you are just collecting additional info, you are seriously considering what you heard and you treat it in a very factual and professional way (probably more professionally than some of the comments you received).

There are several advantages of this approach:

- You move your own attention away from your self-image, so you do not stress;
- You force the other person to give you more facts and more useful details;
- Even if the feedback giver were trying to intentionally hurt you, you effectively deflect the insult; if it was unintentional, you wisely avoid making a fuss about it;
- You force the feedback giver to add perspective and you learn
- You focus the learning on what is truly important to you
- You influence the way you will be talked to in the future

After you have inquired about the first point, you probably do not need to take on the other points right away, hopefully there has been a useful learning discussion already; the feedback giver might have still wanted to insist on a couple of other points, and you would continue to check your understanding, trying to pull more facts and to gently eliminate the vague opinions (e.g. you would rephrase his statement that "the audience was bored" in this way: "OK, so you say that you had the impression that the audience was bored, right?"). You now need to move to Step 4.

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Step 4: Acknowledge the observation

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Step 4 is simply an acknowledgment of what you heard.

When you acknowledge, you simply pay the courtesy to tell the other person that you have heard him and that you are taking his views and opinions into consideration. It is a respectful way to show appreciation and at the same time a firm statement about your boundaries; you want to make it very clear that the further self-reflection is your responsibility.

You can do this in a number of ways, but you need to honestly validate the other person. You cannot demand respect if you disrespect the other person in the first place.

- It is not OK to say "That's your opinion!" which seems to imply that you want nothing to do with that opinion, which in turn can easily be interpreted as an insult (and it probably is)
- It is OK to say "I understand the way you see it"; "I see that this is really upsetting you", "I see that this is really important to you", "I do notice that you feel very strong about this", "I understand that you do not like it/this gives you a problem" etc.

The best is to acknowledge the possible consequences, if you have at all managed to get him to confirm this essential aspect of feedback: "I understand your concern that we might confuse people with too much information" or "I see the risk of giving too much information that could be later misused or misunderstood" or again "I see that you care very much about how we show up with senior management and I understand how you would prefer to have standard and more predictable presentation styles, in order to project a coherent image".

With this, you are not saying that he is right and that you will act as he wants. You also do not say that he is wrong and that you will ignore his feedback. You are respectfully setting boundaries, but he can legitimately expect that you will give it a thought and try to accommodate his desire or suggestions to have streamlined presentations as long as you keep the discretion to choose when and how, and as long as you stay true to yourself, probably more transparent and more detailed than him.

Step 5: Share your intention and perspective

Steps 5 and 6 are optional.

If the "feedback giver" insists on rather giving advice or on passing judgment, you may want to skip these two steps, jump to saying thanks (Step 7) and let it lie for a while. You probably want to do that a few times, maybe repeating Step 4 a few times. If challenged by the "feedback giver" to take a position, you can say that you are still thinking about it and that something is still unclear; gradually your inquiries will become more challenging with more questions about the business consequences or the business impact of following or not following the received feedback.

In a more constructive, truly developmental context, this is the moment to share your intention and your perspective.

You could for example share you intention about your choice to provide many details; maybe to allow everybody draw their own conclusions, or maybe you are practicing a pull style to complement your portfolio of influence, since you tend to mainly use a push style and force your own conclusions too quickly; these are not "justifications" or "excuses", they are simply the conscious reasons for your decision and you share them so that you can have a useful learning dialogue as Step 6.

You would for example say "It is interesting that you noticed how I provided more information and details than usual. It was actually my intention for this and this reason; I see we come from very different perspectives!"

Step 6: Enter a Learning Dialogue

Once we reach the point that we acknowledge the difference, we both respect and appreciate the other person's perspective and we are prepared to learn from our difference, we are ready for Step 6, entering the Learning Dialogue.

Every dialogue is different, of course, so we cannot generalize, but we can stretch the earlier example and make one hypothesis, that the feedback giver will understand your intention and add "I see how you want to be transparent, share all information and invite others to draw their own conclusions, and I support your effort to practice a pulling style with your team and your peers. In this case, you may want to consider the fact that senior management only wanted an update, they trust you and are happy for you to supply them with your conclusions, simple and clear. Are you sure that you want to use the same approach with them as well?" At which point, you might have learnt something new, at least something worth considering. For example that different audiences might have different needs and that perhaps practicing a pulling style with a senior management audience who only wanted quick conclusions was not the best choice.

It is now up to you if you want to continue to discuss or finalize your thoughts separately, but of course in an open dialogue it would be nice to feed back your learning and how you want to follow up.

But remember that steering your development is your own responsibility and that you know best what is important to you and how much you want to take on.

Step 7: Say THANKS

Is it necessary to specify this step? Yes it is. It is so easy to forget!

Even when the feedback is not well performed, even when we get unpleasant advice or irritating criticism, you need to remember to say "thanks".

Why?

The key reason is that you do not want to discourage the person from doing it again; else you would miss an opportunity to stay informed and learn. With Step 3 you work on improving the way feedback comes your way, with Step 7 you ensures that it continues to come.

Only in a few cases (especially with mobbing colleagues) will you put a firm stop to it by saying "Thanks but no thanks".

CONCLUSIONS

During the three previous Industrial Revolutions "it often took decades to build the training systems and labor market institutions needed to develop major new skill sets on a large scale…now this is simply not an option".[28]

What is radically different within the just started Fourth Industrial Revolution is the speed and frequency of changes in many fundamental areas of how we live and work.

The transformation of the job market will require major changes in the way we train and prepare the workforce of the future. With technology ensuring efficiency (doing the same with less), people development will focus on productivity (doing more with the same).

Gone the bureaucracy of control and compliance, gone the Yearly Review with its way of appraising people like if they were commodities, gone the centralized one-size-fits-all training courses; the People Development strategies of the future will need to rely heavily on Instant Feedback Exchange, Coaching and highly interactive decentralized training options.

Feedback is probably the area of highest priority, yet the one that finds us least prepared. In too many organizational contexts, Feedback is still unfortunately associated with the antiquated idea of retroactive performance assessment with focus on fixing weaknesses, whereas we need to look at the future and develop behavioral skills that leverage on strengths.

A productive Developmental Feedback Exchange is light years distant from the classical "judgment and advice" approach, and yet many still think in terms of good/bad and should/should-not.

We need to learn how to provide truly useful observational feedback, how to actively listen, how to check our understanding, how to suspend judgment to stay open for learning, how to offer insights with generosity without attachment, how to respect the freedom of others to take our comments into account or politely disregard them, and how to challenge our prejudice ad biases.

Most important of all, we need to regain the joy of learning that hierarchy and bureaucracy have numbed for too long time.

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