

Leadership Development : Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback

Marshall Goldsmith, USA

Marshall Goldsmith is widely recognized as one of the world's foremost authorities in helping leaders achieve positive, measurable change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams. In 2000, Forbes Magazine listed Marshall as one of five top executive coaches and Human Resources magazine rated Marshall as one of the world's leading HR consultants. He has also been ranked by the Wall Street Journal as one of the "Top 10" consultants in the field of executive education. His work has received national recognition from the Institute for Management Studies, the American Management Association, the American Society for Training and Development and the Human Resource Planning Society. His coaching process has been positively described in both the New York Times and the Financial Times

Email: marshall@a4sl.com

Abstract

Quality communication—between and among people at all levels and every department and division—is the glue that holds organizations together. Feedforward is basically giving someone else positive suggestions for the future, rather than focusing on negatives of the past. By using feedforward—and by encouraging others to use it—leaders can dramatically improve the quality of communication in their organizations, ensuring that the right message is conveyed, and that those who receive it are receptive to its content. The result is a much more dynamic, much more open organization—one whose employees focus on the promise of the future rather than the mistakes of the past. This article presents simple steps for making feedforward work with your group or organization.

Adapted for the Journal of Excellence by James Kendrick from an article by Marshall Goldsmith in *Leader to Leader*, summer 2002, published by Jossey-Bass and The Drucker Foundation.

The Positive Impact of Feedforward Communication

Giving and receiving feedback has long been considered to be an essential skill for leaders. As they strive to achieve the goals of the organization, employees need to know how they are doing. They need to know if their performance is what their leaders expect from them and if not, they need suggestions on how to improve. Traditionally,

this information has been communicated in the form of feedback from leaders to their employees. And, leaders themselves need feedback from their employees, in the form of suggestions for how to improve procedures and processes, innovative ideas for new products and services, and input on their own leadership styles. This has become increasingly common with the advent of 360° feedback.

But there is a fundamental problem with feedback: it focuses on the *past*, on what has already occurred—not on the infinite variety of opportunities that can occur in the future. As such, feedback can be limited and static, as opposed to expansive and dynamic.

Over the past several years, I have observed more than five thousand leaders as they participated in a fascinating experiential exercise. In the exercise, participants are each asked to play two roles. In one role, they are asked to *provide feedforward*—that is, to give someone else suggestions for the future and *help as much as they can*. The term “feedforward” has been used previously by engineers, but not in the domain of human communication until it was coined in a discussion that I had with Jon Katzenbach, author of *The Wisdom of Teams, Real Change Leaders and Peak Performance*.

In the second role, they are asked to *accept feedforward*—that is, to listen to the suggestions for the future and learn as much as they can. The exercise typically lasts for 10-15 minutes, and the average participant has 6-7 dialogue sessions. In the exercise participants are asked to:

- Pick one behavior that they would like to change. Change in this behavior should make a significant, positive difference in their lives.
- Describe this behavior to randomly selected fellow participants. This is done in one-on-one dialogues. It can be done quite simply with comments like, “I want to be a better listener.”
- Ask for feedforward—for two suggestions for the future that might help them achieve a positive change in their selected behavior. *If participants have worked together in the*

past, they are not allowed to give ANY feedback about the past. They are only allowed to give ideas for the future.

- Listen attentively to the suggestions and take notes. *Participants are not allowed to comment on the suggestions in any way. They are not allowed to critique the suggestions or even to make positive judgmental statements, such as, “That’s a good idea.”*
- Thank the other participants for their suggestions.
- Ask the other persons what they would like to change.
- Provide feedforward - two suggestions aimed at helping them change.
- Say, “You are welcome.” when thanked for the suggestions. The entire process of both giving and receiving feedforward usually takes about two minutes.
- Find another participant and keep repeating the process until the exercise is stopped.

When the exercise is finished, I ask participants to provide one word that best describes their reaction to this experience. I ask them to complete the sentence, “This exercise was ...”. The words provided are almost always extremely positive, such as “great”, “energizing”, “useful” or “helpful.” The most common word mentioned is “fun!”

What is the *last* word that most of us think about when we receive coaching and developmental ideas? Fun!

Ten Reasons to Try Feedforward

Participants are then asked why this exercise is seen as fun and helpful as opposed to painful, embarrassing or uncomfortable. Their answers provide a great explanation of why feedforward can often be more useful than feedback.

1. *We can change the future. We can't change the past.* Feedforward helps people envision and focus on a positive future, not a failed past. Athletes are often trained using feedforward. Racecar drivers are taught to, “look at the road, not the wall.” Basketball players are taught to envision the ball going in the hoop and to imagine the perfect shot. By giving people ideas on how they can be even more successful, we can increase their chances of achieving this success in the future.
2. *It can be more productive to help people be “right” in the future than prove they were “wrong” in the past.* Negative feedback often becomes an exercise in “let me prove you were wrong.” This tends to produce defensiveness on the part of the receiver and discomfort on the part of the sender. Even constructively delivered feedback is often seen as negative as it necessarily involves a discussion of mistakes, shortfalls, and problems. Feedforward, on the other hand, is almost always seen as positive because it focuses on solutions.
3. *Feedforward is especially suited to successful people.* Successful people like getting ideas that are aimed at helping them achieve their goals. They tend to resist negative judgment. We all tend to accept feedback

that is consistent with the way we see ourselves. We also tend to reject or deny feedback that is inconsistent with the way we see ourselves. Successful people tend to have a very positive self-image. I have observed many successful executives respond to (and even enjoy) feedforward. I am not sure that these same people would have had such a positive reaction to feedback.

4. *Feedforward can come from anyone who knows about the task. It does not require personal experience with the individual.* One very common positive reaction to the previously described exercise is that participants are amazed by how much they can learn from people that they don't know! For example, if you want to be a better listener, almost any fellow leader can give you ideas on how you can improve. They don't have to know you. Feedback requires knowing about the person. Feedforward just requires having good ideas for achieving the task.
5. *People do not take feedforward as personally as feedback.* In theory, constructive feedback is supposed to “focus on the performance, not the person”. In practice, almost all feedback is taken personally (no matter how it is delivered). Successful people's sense of identity is highly connected with their work. The more successful people are, the more this tends to be true. It is hard to give a dedicated professional feedback that is not taken personally. Feedforward cannot involve a personal critique, since it is discussing something that has not yet happened!

6. *Feedback can reinforce personal stereotyping and negative self-fulfilling prophecies.* Feedforward can reinforce the possibility of change. Feedback can reinforce the feeling of failure. How many of us have been “helped” by a spouse, significant other or friend, who seems to have a near-photographic memory of our previous “sins” that they share with us in order to point out the history of our shortcomings. Negative feedback can be used to reinforce the message, “this is just the way you are”. Feedforward is based on the assumption that people can make positive changes in the future.
7. *Face it! Most of us hate getting negative feedback, and we don't like to give it.* I have reviewed summary 360° feedback reports for over 50 companies. The items, “provides developmental feedback in a timely manner” and “encourages and accepts constructive criticism” almost always score near the bottom on co-worker satisfaction with leaders. Traditional training does not seem to make a great deal of difference. If leaders got better at providing feedback every time the performance appraisal forms were “improved”, most should be perfect by now! Leaders are not very good at giving or receiving negative feedback. It is unlikely that this will change in the near future.
8. *Feedforward can cover almost all of the same “material” as feedback.* Imagine that you have just made a terrible presentation in front of the executive committee. Your manager is in the room. Rather than make you “relive” this humiliating experience, your manager might help you prepare for future presentations by giving you suggestions for the future. These suggestions can be very specific and still delivered in a positive way. In this way your manager can “cover the same points” without feeling as embarrassed and without making you feel even more humiliated.
9. *Feedforward tends to be much faster and more efficient than feedback.* An excellent technique for giving ideas to successful people is to say, “Here are four ideas for the future. Please accept these in the positive spirit that they are given. If you can only use two of the ideas, you are still two ahead. Just ignore what doesn't make sense for you.” With this approach almost no time gets wasted on judging the quality of the ideas or “proving that the ideas are wrong”. This “debate” time is usually negative; it can take up a lot of time, and it is seldom productive. By eliminating judgment of the ideas, the process becomes much more positive for the sender, as well as the receiver. Successful people tend to have a high need for self-determination and will tend to accept ideas that they can “buy” while rejecting ideas that feel “forced” upon them.
10. *Feedforward can be a useful tool to apply with managers, peers and team members.* Rightly or wrongly, feedback is associated with judgment. This can lead to very negative unintended consequences when applied to managers or peers. Feedforward does not imply superiority of judgment. It is more focused on being a helpful “fellow traveler” than an

“expert”. As such it can be easier to hear from a person who is not in a position of power or authority. An excellent team building exercise is to have each team member ask, “How can I better help our team in the future?” and listen to feedforward from fellow team members (in one-on-one dialogues.)

In summary, the intent of this article is not to imply that leaders should never give feedback or that performance appraisals should be abandoned. The intent is to show how feedforward can often be preferable to feedback in day-to-day interactions. Aside from its effectiveness and efficiency, feedforward can make life a lot more enjoyable. When managers are asked, “How did you feel the last time you received feedback?”

their most common responses are very negative. When managers are asked how they felt after receiving feedforward, they reply that feedforward was not only useful, it was also fun!

Quality communication — between and among people at all levels and every department and division—is the glue that holds organizations together. By using feedforward—and by encouraging others to use it—leaders can dramatically improve the quality of communication in their organizations, ensuring that the right message is conveyed, and that those who receive it are receptive to its content. The result is a much more dynamic, much more open organization—one whose employees focus on the promise of the future rather than the mistakes of the past.