HOW TO IMPROVE FEEDBACK

Therese Huston

In addition to all the work and stress it creates, there's another reason managers might put off giving feedback—it doesn't always work.

One team of researchers analyzed more than twelve thousand instances of feedback and found that, on average, people who received feedback improved their performance a little, but not everyone did. In a whopping 38 percent of the cases, people's performance actually got worse, not better, after receiving feedback.

Perhaps you're not surprised by that statistic. Perhaps you've watched someone make a small mistake, offered advice, and then watched in disbelief as they made an even bigger mistake. But it still raises the question—why does feedback sometimes backfire? It could be that motivation tanks when we're told "That was terrible," and we stop trying altogether. Or it could be that our inner teenager comes out when we hear "Don't do it that way," and we redouble our efforts to prove our way is best.

So how do we give feedback that works? There are two popular camps at the moment, and they couldn't be more different. (If you disagree with your boss about how to give feedback, she might be in the other camp.) In the one camp, we have visionaries that argue feedback needs to be radically more direct, that challenging people is the key. Ray Dalio, the founder of the investment firm Bridgewater and author of the bestseller *Principles*, takes this position, as does Kim Scott, author of the bestseller *Radical Candor*. Dalio argues that if organizations want to make better decisions, they need to make "radical transparency" a top priority, which means they need to take things they ordinarily hide, particularly mistakes, problems, and weaknesses, and put them on the table where everyone can see them. Whereas Dalio focuses on the organization level, Kim Scott focuses on the individual level and says that as managers, we should strive for radical candor. Her philosophy is that we need to both "challenge directly" and "care personally" with our feedback. If you challenge directly without caring personally, Scott argues, then you're just being obnoxiously aggressive and a garden-variety asshole.

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The other camp takes the opposite view on how to give feedback. Visionaries in this camp insist that challenging directly leads not to excellence, but to disgruntled employees. Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall, authors of *Nine Lies About Work*, argue that if we focus most of our efforts on remediating an employee's weaknesses, at best we bring him from a -10 to a 0, but if we instead focus our attention on an employee's strengths, we might bring someone who is currently a 5 all the way up to a 10. So if you want feedback to work, they argue, focus less on someone's frustrating mistakes and more on their promising successes.

These thought leaders are transforming the way we give feedback, injecting new energy into an old problem and offering insightful strategies along the way. But something is missing from each of these approaches. Ray Dalio's radical transparency doesn't work for everyone—approximately 30 percent of Bridgewater employees leave within the first eighteen months. Attrition rates in the finance services industry average 10.8 percent per year, so we'd expect roughly 15 to 16 percent of employees to leave Bridgewater in the first year and a half, not 30 percent. Not everyone relishes having their mistakes laid bare. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have the strengths-based feedback proposed by Buckingham and Goodall, which feels fabulous—we'd all rather celebrate our strengths than wallow in our weaknesses—but it also feels extreme. As managers, there are times when we need to discuss problematic behaviors, and we need tools for doing so. If someone has a tendency to miss major deadlines or share highly sensitive information, you can't just point to their strengths.

Of the three approaches, Kim Scott's philosophy of "care personally" and "challenge directly" is the most balanced, and I can see how it would be ideal when done skillfully. But I suspect it takes pretty high emotional intelligence to get it right, to know when you truly care about the person. Not all managers have high EQ. Research reveals that middle managers tend to have the highest EQ, while executives in the C-suite tend to have the lowest. To make matters worse, most of us think we have higher emotional intelligence than we actually possess. For instance, roughly 95 percent of us think that we have high self-awareness, when research shows that only 10 to 15 percent of us do. If you're low in self-awareness or empathy, you could use radical candor to excuse terrible behavior. In one of my interviews, a person in the tech industry described how a senior-level manager caught him alone in the hallway, backed him up against the wall, and said in a low voice, "If you ever say anything like that in a meeting again, ever, you're off my team. And I'll make sure no other team takes you. Do we have an understanding?" That manager was abusive, but if HR had approached him, he could insist he *was* showing he cared personally, because he talked with the employee alone, not in front of the team. For him, that was progress.

My other concern about the radical candor approach is that it's based on the feedback giver's intent, not on their impact. If I intend to care personally, that's enough. That gives me tremendous license. A manager can have wonderful intentions but still have an alienating impact, especially when a white man is giving feedback to a woman or a member of an underprivileged group.

We need an approach that's foolproof, that won't lead droves of people to quit, that gives managers strategies for addressing problems, not just strengths, and that doesn't require a high EQ. We need an approach that offers actions you can try, where you can tell by your behaviors and the other person's reaction if you got it right, rather than just trusting your good intentions. For feedback to work, it can't just come from a good place. It also has to land well.

What happens if you deliver feedback poorly? Are people just discouraged for a few days, maybe a week, and then bounce back to their normal, focused selves? Some do, but in my research on employees' most demotivating feedback experiences, over 38 percent feel disengaged and demotivated at work for over a month, a handful for more than a year. Gallup finds that when feedback leaves employees feeling demotivated, disappointed, or depressed, four out of five of those employees are actively or passively looking for another job. We lose a lot when we give sloppy feedback.

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IF YOU WANT FEEDBACK TO WORK, MAKE IT A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION

Most of us think of feedback as a one-way communication. If I have feedback to give, then I tell, you listen. Even the Business Dictionary defines feedback as a one-sided communication: "Feedback: the information sent to an entity . . . about its prior behavior so that the entity may adjust its current and future behavior to achieve the desired result." You might be telling someone to keep doing something—"your two graphs were brilliant"—or to stop doing something—"you need to stop burning popcorn in the microwave"—but it still boils down to a simple *I tell, you listen.*

It's gloriously simple and it's often ineffective.

How do I know that a one-sided conversation is problematic? I'm a social scientist, and I study feedback, the good, the bad, and the bruising. I conduct surveys to identify people's reactions to feedback. I also analyze the feedback itself to understand the kind of comments employees receive and whether an employee's identity—whether they're male or female, Black or white—affects what other people praise or think needs improvement.

In one of my studies, I asked employees about their worst feedback experiences at work. I asked them to describe one of their most demotivating feedback experiences, with all the details about who was giving the feedback, what the feedback was, how it adversely affected them, and for how long.

Of all the questions I asked, the most revealing was "What would have made you, the feedback recipient, feel better?" Before I conducted this research, I expected that the most common response was going to be "I would have felt much better if I had trusted the person giving the feedback." In just about every management book, there's a discussion about how trust is essential, that we need to build trust if we want colleagues to accept unwelcome news. It makes perfect sense—if I trust you and you tell me that I'm not living up to my potential, then I'm going to take that to heart.

Sure enough, some people (19 percent) said that trust would have made an awful feedback experience better, but most people pointed to other factors.

I would have felt much better if … Percentage of respondents
My hard work had been acknowledged. 53%
The feedback had been accurate. 51%
I had a chance to discuss the feedback more fully with the feedback giver.40%
The feedback giver had listened to me.29%
The feedback giver and I had worked together to generate next steps.25%
I had known the feedback was coming. 24%
The feedback had been more specific. 24%
The feedback giver had asked me what I thought of the feedback. 22%
I had understood what I was expected to do differently in the future. 20%
I trusted the person giving me feedback. 19%
The feedback had come from a different person.13%

When you look at the top five answers, two clear themes emerge. First, we see that people want their hard work acknowledged. This probably doesn't come as any surprise. Most of us want our hard work to be recognized, especially by our managers. The second theme is that people want a chance to provide their side of the story. When you look at answers two through five, we see that feedback recipients would have felt better if they'd had a chance to correct inaccurate feedback or if they'd had a chance to discuss the feedback or to work jointly toward a solution. When it's feedback time, it turns out we want a good listener more than we want a good talker. Researchers find that if employees think you're a good listener, they also think you're better at giving feedback.

And employees' perception of the feedback experience matters. When employees believe that they're getting good feedback from their managers, when they see their managers trying to promote their growth, then all kinds of good things happen. Employees who believe their managers give good feedback do more creative work. They express less desire to leave the company, they feel more loyalty toward their managers, and they see their work as more complex and engaging.

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What's fascinating is that employees' perception is key. In these studies that find that good feedback leads to greater employee creativity and lower attrition, no one recorded what managers said. No one compared the manager's actual feedback to some model of good feedback. No one even asked managers about their intentions. All that mattered was that employees believed that their managers were investing in them. I'm not saying that you should pretend to care about your employees' growth when you couldn't actually care less. I *am* saying that if we want feedback to work, we need to prioritize how employees want to be treated in the feedback process. And what we know is that employees want to be heard.

It's a bit counterintuitive that feedback needs to be a two-way conversation. After all, as the manager, it's your job to share what you see working or not working. You're looking out for the team's goals, and that gives you a much-needed perspective. All of this is true.
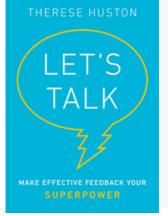
But when you dig into the examples of incredibly effective feedback that Scott, Dalio, Buckingham, and Goodall provide, you'll see their memorable examples all have one thing in common—two people engaging in conversation. It's not one person telling someone what's good or what's bad, it's two people talking. What I hear again and again in successful feedback conversations is that they were actual conversations in which two people talked and those same two people listened.

Books on how to give feedback often ask you to fill in complicated grids before you walk into the meeting to figure out what you're asking of the other person. Getting clear on your message is important, but these books can leave you thinking that you do the hard work before the conversation.

The truth is that the hard work *is* the conversation. The hard part is listening and getting the other person to listen. Instead of scripting a perfect message in advance, you need to figure out what your direct reports need to hear to activate their ability to *actually* hear you. And it's easier for someone to hear and see you once they feel you've heard and seen them. 🔖

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