

Feedback is not only about giving

Part I: Understanding Feedback

Marti Janse van Rensburg

We are probably all aware of the saying: “feedback is the breakfast of champions” coined by Kenneth Blanchard. Most of us however pay only lip service to it. Why is this? Surveys indicate that about 75% of today’s executives reckon they are in the top 25% of their profession. That gives bending statistics quite another meaning. They are often blissfully unaware of how their behaviour could adversely affect the organisation. Very few people accurately assess themselves and most people only accept feedback that is close to their own views of themselves.

I will start by looking at why feedback is so important – the ‘breakfast of champions’ bit - as important as the view that breakfast should be the most important meal of the day. I will also look at why it is so hard. Then I will tackle the receiving of feedback. Most managers and executives easily give feedback, or more accurately - criticise, but are not that good at receiving feedback. If we can get the receiving right then maybe we can get the giving right too. In Part II, I will look at the giving of feedback, what to do with feedback and how to turn it into practical results.

Why Feedback

Psychologists have long recognized the importance of feedback for learning. This was confirmed in a McKinsey survey of over 12 000 managers worldwide. In this survey managers considered candid, insightful feedback extremely important to their development, but did not believe that companies do a good job of providing such feedback. Somewhat passing the buck as feedback is often more valuable when elicited than this expectation that ‘they’ (the company) should provide it.

Freud showed in his work that we are never completely aware of what is going on around us, which probably explains the research in the opening

paragraph that most executives reckon they are in the top 25% of their profession. We all have blind spots – those things others notice about us that we don't. Do you recall the time you heard your own voice for the first time in a recording and how it did not sound like you where-as everyone else around thought it sounded exactly like you? The recording is a form of feedback. Feedback can be so useful in showing us our blind spots, if only we would at least listen and then *choose* whether we want to hear or not.

Feedback is therefore, first and foremost, about learning, development and change. Unfortunately most people feel that feedback means judgment and in many cases the receiver creates a shield to block the message.

It might be interesting to note where the word comes from. Kurt Lewin borrowed the term (feedback) from electrical engineering and applied it to the behavioural sciences in the 1950s. It was broadly used to describe a process being adjusted or changed due to information about its results or effects. An important element here is the difference between the desired and actual result. There was (and still is) a concern that organizations, groups and relationships generally suffered from a lack of accurate information about what was happening around their performance.

Feedback became a key ingredient in development and was found to be most effective when it followed the generating event as closely as possible, and when the recipient checked with other group members to establish its validity. This is still true today.

What honest feedback can do

- Improve your relationship with others.
- Improve your work processes by enabling you to change the way you get the work done.
- Improve your results by measuring on the job achievements.
- Improve your self-awareness especially the impact your behaviour and actions have on others.

What feedback is not

- Feedback should never be seen as a form of punishment
- Feedback is not necessarily negative. Positive reinforcement is necessary to ensure that acceptable behaviour continues or is further entrenched
- Feedback is not a one-way monologue but should be a discussion.
- Feedback is not an opportunity to get your own back; it should never lead to a personal attack
- Feedback is not the only point of view

It is worthwhile to note that feedback is more likely to affect learning, growth and change in areas that least threatens the recipient's self worth. Learning new job skills is usually the easiest type of change a person can make, whereas altering inherent personality characteristics is the most difficult. This is shown below in the graph. The more senior one is in an organisation the more critical the behavioural aspects become and therefore the tougher the feedback. With feedback on skills, the results are easily quantifiable. With behaviour, feedback becomes subjective and we also become more sensitive to it. This is important to remember both when you receive and give feedback.

Pic missing

Taken from: Harvard ManageMentor on Giving and Receiving Feedback; Harvard Business School Publishing 2003

Why is Feedback so hard: Cognitive and Emotional Dynamics

Extensive psychological research has shown that people tend not to view themselves accurately. Secondly they are inaccurate in their perception of how others view them. To be more specific, people mostly (not always) see themselves in a more positive light than others see them and therefore the feedback is more likely to appear inaccurate to them. The 75% in the 25% mentioned before is a case in point. Some people, the minority, see themselves in a less positive light than others see them. This is therefore still an inaccurate assessment of self.

Other than the inaccurate perception of self, most of us also have a self-serving bias, which means that in assessing ourselves we tend to take responsibility for our successes and blame external forces or others for our failures. Unfortunately this self-serving bias or positive illusions are at the same time a hallmark of mental health and are crucial in our ability to avoid depression, maintain self-esteem, confidence, and optimism. Bandura has shown that high perceived self-efficacy could enhance performance on a variety of tasks. He has argued that seeing yourself as more capable could enhance your performance more than an accurate self-perception can. It is important though to distinguish between seeing yourself as more capable and being totally deluded about your abilities.

Furthermore, feedback can be seen as a personal attack – the proverbial sabre-tooth tiger. Physiologically it can trigger the amygdala and release adrenalin. The receiver might go into fight or flight mode. It can therefore interfere with a person's ability to learn and respond constructively to feedback.

This might seem confusing: we need feedback to learn and grow and but it can destroy one's confidence and self-efficacy to a point of hindering growth and learning. The question is therefore how to give feedback without impairing or disabling a person's positive self-illusion or self-efficacy and thereby performance and/or how to utilise feedback to enhance a person's self-efficacy and growth?

I believe as a starting point in answering these difficult questions that we need to look at how we receive feedback. If we can reflect and enhance self-awareness in our receiving of feedback it might make it easier to have empathy with and understand the reaction of those that we are giving feedback to.

Receiving Feedback

We looked at why feedback is so important and the dynamics surrounding feedback that makes it is difficult for all of us to either receive or give

feedback. We will now look more specifically at the receiving of feedback and what can be done to ease the blow.

It is very difficult to receive negative feedback or criticism without feeling destroyed even if it is well meant. Understanding our reaction to criticism is important and we need to look at where our reactions originate. Our first encounter with criticism or feedback was from our parents and teachers. Remember your parents, or a teacher, asking: "Are you stupid?" As a child that information will be processed as being true data and therefore person specific instead of behaviour specific. The first point in not feeling destroyed when hearing negative feedback is to realise that the feedback is not about you as a person but about behaviour that illicit an unwanted response.

Therefore let us consider the following in preparation for both receiving and giving feedback:

- *Different interpretation*

We are constantly bombarded with information that we need to process and make sense of. It is not possible for an individual to process all the information they are bombarded with, therefore each person has a set of filters that unconsciously enables them to pay attention to the information that is important to them. These filters are influenced by our background, culture, personality and experiences. We not only select what data to focus on but we then set out to interpret the data according to our frame of reference to enable us to make sense of the world around us. Interpretation of feedback will therefore differ from person to person and so will the emotions and the reactions that follow. It is therefore quite possible that another person's interpretations can be quite unexpected.

- *Selling own point of view*

We often overestimate the likelihood that others will see things the same way we do. It is better to avoid that assumption and to rather keep an open mind and listen - whether in receiving or giving feedback. We need to recognise that there is a gap between our conclusions and someone else's conclusions. Neither party should play the role of educator in trying to

convince the other of his/her view, but should rather ask questions and listen.

▪ *Impact of strong emotions*

Your emotions can influence the formulation and the delivery of the feedback. Some of these could be:

- Your own unrelated personal problems and stresses for instance anxiety about giving or receiving feedback can lead to irritation and frustration
- Your working history and working relationship with the other person
- If you believe the person's behaviour has had an impact on you
- If you received feedback that was maybe a somewhat unpleasant surprise and you know this person in front of you was one of the people who gave that feedback, there could be resentment and an inclination to want to hit back when you give feedback.

Steps to follow:

- Once you have heard feedback, without collapsing, you need to ascertain if you agree or not. This is important, since feedback is not about right or wrong but another person's perception of your behaviour. You can therefore agree, disagree or be unsure. Preparing yourself before the discussion if possible will decrease the chances of being unsure or over-reacting to any statement or assessment. When any form of emotion is experienced, the human brain is programmed to respond to the threat and an emotional response is triggered. Acting on that first impulse can lead you to say or do things that you later regret. Preparing will assist in that while you acknowledge your instinctive emotional response, you don't act on it in public. It allows you time to step back from the situation and let rational thoughts influence your actions. If you cannot prepare then you can always elect to hear the feedback and opt to respond later after you have given it some thought.
- General criticism is very difficult to deal with and/or to use as a springboard for development. It is therefore important to clarify any

feedback that is not specific. Do not argue with the statement or agree with it, rather try to get to the bottom of it. Respond to specific issues and work from there.

- Understand what pushes your buttons. This is part of self-awareness that plays a very important role in our ability to utilise feedback as an opportunity to grow. Self-awareness is defined as our ability to understand our moods, emotions and drivers, what triggers them as well as their effect on others. As part of that ability we need to understand which areas we cannot bear to be criticized about – the ones we instantly overreact to or are hugely sensitive to? Your soft spots or buttons are the areas where your level of reaction to criticism is way out of proportion to the criticism itself.

Coping with praise

Feedback can and should also include the positive and we sometimes neglect to be positively encouraged by it. The reasons for the inhibitions can be cultural embarrassment, doubting the source of the praise or fearing a backlash. Typical thoughts are:

- “What does he/she want?”
- “Flattery will get you everywhere!”
- “I don’t believe you, you just don’t want me to feel bad”
- “Don’t say that! My colleagues will be jealous and won’t like me anymore if you praise me and not them”

Hear the praise, gracefully accept it without rushing it and remember it. This is a valuable source of information that will enable you to build confidence. Also, as you practice to receive positive feedback it becomes easier to give it.

Saying thank you

Just as you might be nervous to receive feedback, so might others be uncomfortable to give it. It is important to honour people’s time and effort and to thank them for their feedback, regardless of whether you agreed or not. It is also advisable to share with people, especially direct reports, what you intend to do with the information. Share both your strengths and weaknesses

with them and thank them for their feedback and the opportunity for growth it has given you.

You can also use this thank you and sharing session (another feedback process) to elicit any help you might need in achieving the goals you set for yourself. Research has shown that the most effective form of feedback is self-generated feedback. Use these discussions to start a continuous process and ask for feedback. When you ask, you control the process, and you can make sure that the feedback you get is specific and not vague. Asking for specific feedback also has the added advantage that it takes the sting out of the normal emotional reactions experienced when it is unexpected.

To be continued ...

We looked at why feedback is so important and yet so hard, the dichotomy of a self-serving bias and inflated sense of self versus the need to hear feedback. We also looked at how to build self-awareness in the process of receiving feedback. In part II we will look at how to give feedback and what to do to turn feedback into results and changed behaviour not only for yourself when you receive feedback but also for others as you give them feedback.