# Try Feed*Forward* Instead of Feedback

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Providing 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 in line with what their leaders expect. They need to learn what they have done well and what they need to change. Traditionally, this information has been communicated in the form of "downward feedback" from leaders to their employees. Just as employees need feedback from leaders, leaders can benefit from feedback from their employees. Employees can provide useful input on the effectiveness of procedures and processes and as well as input to managers on their leadership effectiveness. This "upward feedback" has become increasingly common with the advent of 360° multi-rater assessments.

But there is a fundamental problem with all types of feedback: it focuses on a *past*, on what has already occurred—not on the infinite variety of opportunities that can happen 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 ten 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 provide feed*forward*[1]—that is, to give someone else suggestions for the future and *help as much as they can*. In the second role, they are asked to accept feed*forward*—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, such as, "I want to be a better listener."*

- Ask for feed*forward*—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*

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[1] The term "feedforward" was coined in a discussion that I had with Jon Katzenbach, author of *The Wisdom of Teams, Real Change Leaders* and *Peak Performance.*

*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 feed*forward* - two suggestions aimed at helping the other person change.

- Say, "You are welcome." when thanked for the suggestions. *The entire process of both giving and receiving* feed*forward 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 feedback, coaching and developmental ideas? Fun!

## *Eleven 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 as a developmental tool.

1. ***We can change the future. We can't change the past.*** Feed*forward* helps people envision and focus on a positive future, not a failed past. Athletes are often trained using feed*forward*. Racecar drivers are taught to, "Look at the road ahead, not at 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," than prove they were "wrong."*** 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. Feed*forward*, on the other hand, is almost always seen as positive because it focuses on solutions – not problems.

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) feed*forward*. 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. Feed*forward* 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. Feed*forward* cannot involve a personal critique, since it is discussing something that has not yet happened! Positive suggestions tend to be seen as objective advice – personal critiques are often viewed as personal attacks.

6. ***Feedback can reinforce personal stereotyping and negative self-fulfilling prophecies.*** Feed*forward* 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". Feed*forward* is based on the assumption that the receiver of suggestions 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 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 often not very 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 "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 – or even career-limiting - unintended consequences when applied to managers or peers. Feed*forward* 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 feed*forward* from fellow team members (in one-on-one dialogues.)

11. ***People tend to listen more attentively to feedforward than feedback***. One participant is the feed*forward* exercise noted, "I think that I listened more effectively in this exercise than I ever do at work!" When asked why, he responded, "Normally, when others are speaking, I am so busy *composing* a reply that will make sure that I sound smart – that I am not fully *listening* to what the other person is saying. In feed*forward* the only reply that I am allowed to make is 'thank you'. Since I don't have to worry about composing a clever reply – I can focus all of my energy on listening to the other person!"

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 feed*forward* 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 dwelling on the mistakes of the past.