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Making Feedback Work as It Should

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Contrary to what you've heard, feedback is neither good nor bad. Feedback is merely feedback. Nothing less and nothing more.

Oh, we talk about "good feedback" and "bad feedback" all the time. So I'm flying in the face of conventional wisdom to say that feedback is neither good nor bad. But bear with me for a moment, and I'll leave you with an entirely new perspective on feedback.

Let's start by backing up a century and a half to the very origins of the concept of feedback itself. The term had its origin, not in business or management, but in the manufacture of the earliest "smart" machines. These were the first machines with an inherent ability to regulate themselves."

An Early Feedback System

The need for such machines emerged as we learned how to harness steam. Very quickly we were building machines of immense power. They created so much power, indeed, that they often destroyed themselves by blowing up. Some method was needed by which steam engines could automatically regulate the amount of steam pressure in the boiler.

This led to an ingenious, but simple solution. The next time that you watch a movie with an old-fashioned steam engine huffing and puffing along a track, pay close attention. There, on top of the engine and just behind the smokestack, you will see one of these early feedback systems at work.

What you are looking for is a vertical shaft, only about a foot high, with two arms hanging from its crown and a heavy metal ball at the tip of each arm. These arms are positioned opposite one another and are hinged so that they can move up and down.

Whenever the boiler is generating steam, this entire device is spinning, first slowly, then faster and faster as steam pressure increases. This spinning motion applies centrifugal force to the heavy metal balls. Unable to fly off of the spinning arms, the balls instead begin lifting the hinged arms upward.

What you can't see is that these arms are also attached to a piston which opens and closes a relief valve on the boiler. As steam pressure mounts, the balls spin faster, the arms lift higher, and the relief valve starts to open. This allows excess pressure to escape.

Once the pressure is reduced, the balls spin more slowly. And as they settle into a lower position, the valve closes again to keep the pressure inside the boiler at an optimal level. The boiler is thus able to self-regulate itself and not blow up.

The Purpose of Feedback Systems

Today we are surrounded by feedback systems that are far more sophisticated than these early devices. The thermostat in a heating or air conditioning system is a feedback system. The computers that control your car's fuel injection system are another.

All such feedback systems serve a single purpose. They provide information to a more complex system so that it can self-regulate itself.

Now let's take that principle and apply it to management feedback systems. As managers we are expected to provide regular feedback to our workers. This is typically done in periodic evaluations of performance. Commonly these feedback sessions center on performance that is deficient, which is why the word "feedback" has gained a negative connotation with some people.

But in truth, feedback is simply information provided to someone so that he or she can be more effective at self-management, self-regulation. That's why feedback, properly done, is neither good nor bad. It's neither positive nor negative. It's just information.

Think once more of the feedback that your thermostat delivers to the air conditioning system. You would never say that the thermostat gave the air conditioning "some bad feedback." So why do we talk like that about the feedback that we give one another?

What if we took a different perspective? What if we began thinking of feedback as data supplied to a living, breathing self-management system rather than an evaluation of performance? What if we saw feedback as merely providing information to permit another person to self-manage more effectively?

Six Guidelines on Feedback

At first glance, this may not seem like a significant shift in perspective. But it's really quite profound. It has a significant impact on the attitude with which we approach feedback, the assumptions that govern our feedback, and the style with which we deliver it. Let me summarize some of these differences.

- First, I do not view the other person as someone who needs to be "fixed." This other person is not broken. Instead, I see this person as a capable individual who wants to do well and who needs some additional information to self-manage properly. This gives me a more positive outlook on the person than I would have if I focused solely on performance issues, particularly on inadequate performance.
- Second, when I genuinely hold this more positive outlook about the other person, my belief shows itself in a myriad of non-verbal signals. The other party will be able to sense the conviction with which I believe in his or her capability, motivation, and value.

- Third, I am more sensitive to providing timely feedback. It does no good if the thermostat says to the heating system, "Here is some information about what the temperature was in the room two days ago." Untimely feedback amounts to nothing more than reflection on past events. Therefore, I provide feedback regularly, on a timely basis, not just when it's time for a performance review.
- Fourth, I am particularly careful to couch my feedback in language that the other party can understand. The most expensive thermostat on earth is of no value if it is sending information to the heating system in an incomprehensible format.
- Fifth, my feedback is restricted only to appropriate information. The heating system has no need to know how bright the lights are in the room or the color of the carpet on the floor. As a thermostat, I focus only on relevant information.
- Sixth, when I picture myself as a thermostat feeding back information to a complex system, I am freer to center my comments on the facts and what I've observed, not on my judgments about these facts and observations.

For example, fact-based feedback does not say, "You must try harder to be here on time." Among other things, this statement implies that the person does not try to be on time. I've just injected my judgment into the exchange. My judgment call, in turn, impugns the other party's character, in violation of the principle that we believe in his or her capability, motivation, and value.

Instead, information-based feedback might say, "Your time card indictes that you arrived late seven days last month. Our standard, as you know, is a 95% punctuality rate. Think about what you could do to meet this standard consistently."

Notice how this closing statement is about self-management. This wording strongly broadcasts the assumption that "you are a sophisticated system capable of self-regulation when provided appropriate information."

Delivered this way, feedback minimizes the opportunity for the other party to become resentful or defensive. They may still react this way, to be sure. After all, you can't control the meaning that they put on the facts that you present. But if we truly subscribe to the six principles in the bulleted list above and follow them faithfully, our feedback is far more likely to be well-received and to lead to the outcomes that we want to see.