

The proof of the pudding

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal reveal the ingredients of their recipe for feedback success

Over the past 30 years, we have read, heard and practised much about feedback. What we have also observed is how little of this good practice is acted upon. Ten years ago, we looked at this and the results of our looking resulted in a model that has been tried in companies. The most important result of this model is that it has increased the quantity and quality of feedback being given in the companies that have applied it. Let us share with you what we did and the model that resulted from the research.

Firstly, some background. We started with two simple statements – ‘people learn what to do from success’, and ‘people learn what *not* to do from mistakes and failure’. We hope you are saying that’s obvious. Perhaps, just perhaps, it is not as obvious as it first appears. Having asked people what they did in a particular situation, we found that many knew, but often had difficulty in describing specific behaviours that had led to success. They were often better at describing what they had got wrong. This was often related to the reaction of the person with whom they were interacting.

We found that many managers, giving what they called ‘feedback’,



were praising while others, giving what they also called 'feedback', were criticising or making general comments. Many managers, when asked *when* they gave feedback, mentioned appraisals. If the results of asking people about the last time they received feedback is to be believed, many managers give no feedback at all. It was quite common for people to say something to the effect of "I know I am doing okay as my manager has not told me I am not."

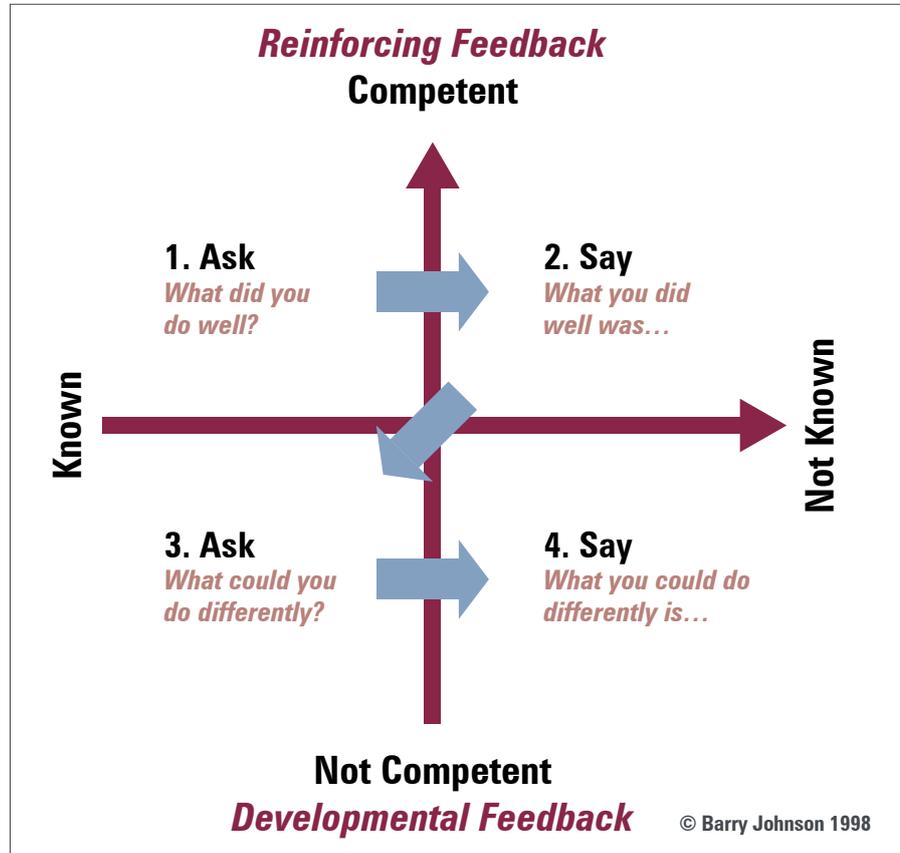
In summary, we found that feedback is, in reality, infrequent, although, talking to them, you might find that managers don't believe that.

Another observation was the reaction of people when we said something like: "I will now give you some feedback". A large minority of people responded with obvious concern, and a number of that minority responded with apprehension. It seems, for many people, feedback has disapproving connotations.

We also found a minority of people who only wanted what they called negative feedback. Our exploration of this indicated that it was driven by them wanting to improve their performance by knowing what they had done 'wrong'. Most of this group assumed they knew what they had done well. This was not confirmed by exploration. Some of this group actually *disliked* being told what they had done well. One perspective of this was that it was a Meta programme, 'away from' people wanting to move away from mistakes or error and 'towards' people wanting to move towards their successful behaviours. This has not been explored.

The question is: what is this thing we call feedback?

For our initial exploration, we defined feedback in the organisation context as *information that specifies how a person behaved in a specific situation, with the purpose of helping him maintain or improve his performance in similar situations.*



The consequence of this definition is that feedback cannot be positive or negative, because it is just a description of observed behaviour. Further, it is not praise or castigation, because these require judgments and are usually related to opinions.

Just to make this concrete, let us give you an example. You observe a person handling somebody who is irate about something. What you observe is the person 'reflects the feeling' of the irate person when she says: "I can hear that you are angry at the way you have been treated." You observe the way that that specific expression of understanding creates a relationship that reduces the emotional temperature. This valuable behaviour, 'reflecting feelings', would be useful in other situations if the person knew what she did.

So, does she know what she did? If she doesn't, how do you bring it to her notice?

It was through this sort of observation and enquiry, often in the feedback of behaviour during training using simulations or feedback of behaviour observed in assessment centre exercises, that we gathered information.

In addition to live, on-the-ground observation and exploration, we also considered the work of psychologists. Those of you who have studied some basic psychology might have run into the work of Professor B.F. 'Fred' Skinner (1904-1990), a leader in the field of behaviourism. He trained rats and pigeons. We know people are a bit more complex than rats and pigeons but he discovered something that applies to all of us: *If we reinforce behaviour, it is more likely to be repeated.*

'Reinforce' is just psycho-speak for reward, or bringing something to somebody's notice. If behaviour is ignored or the benefit is unrecognised by the person behaving, it is likely to be extinguished. If the

behaviour is punished (it has therefore been brought to the person's attention), it is likely to continue but be concealed. Just for clarity, we will mention *negative reinforcement*. Negative reinforcement is an increase in the likelihood of behaviour when the consequence is the removal of an aversive stimulus.

Of course, the beliefs and values of the researchers may affect what is found. The main one that we are aware of, that had an impact on what we did, was 'treat people as adults'. We believe this value enhanced what we did. So, what emerged as the model?

Let us work through this process. You may notice that it asks the person what they did well in a specific situation. Our findings are that people tend to generalise: "Um, well, he agreed to La La." This is the start point. What the person says can be explored to tease out the behaviours used.

The advantage of this approach is that the person is dealing with behaviours he feels were constructive, so he tends to feel good about the situation. He is being treated as an adult by being asked. The person may mention behaviours you have not recognised and it is normal for people not to recognise some of the behaviours you have seen them use.

The specification of the situation is important, as it aids the receiver's memory. Giving feedback as close to the observed action as possible is highly advantageous. We have noticed that managers who 'walk the floor' have a great advantage in this respect, as do managers who hold regular one-to-one reviews every two or three weeks with their direct reports.

Valuable behaviours not already mentioned can now be raised. Behaviours are valuable if they move the interaction or situation towards the required conclusion. They may be contributory, such as behaviours that built rapport, or behaviours that directly led towards the required output. It may be the required output was not achieved,

but this does not negate the fact that behaviours that were moving the interaction or task in the required direction were used.

Notice that we are reinforcing behaviours, and reinforced behaviours are likely to be used again.

The feedback, so far, has reinforced what the person has done. He has demonstrated some behaviour that has been reinforced. These reinforced behaviours are more likely to occur again in similar situations. Consequently, we call this *reinforcing feedback*. We note that this can be related to 'behaviour modification'.

Giving feedback as close to the observed action as possible is highly advantageous

The model now moves on to asking what the person could do differently; please note that it avoids asking a person what he has done wrong – he usually knows that. The words "could do differently" are crucial. It may be that the person has been highly successful and the question helps him think of other behaviours or approaches that may be of use in similar situations. This is a developmental question. It is looking forward. Our findings are that, as the feedback interaction is encouraging, people are prepared to be active in exploring what they may do differently.

These three steps usually result in not having to tell the person anything else. Quite often, he will mention the awkward thing you didn't really *want* to ask him to do, or the annoying thing you wanted him to stop doing!

Sometimes the fourth step is required if you want the person to consider something specific, or he needs to do something differently but doesn't know what. Because

of this pattern of feedback, people accept being told that behaviours they used were non-productive or damaging in some way. The participant in the feedback interaction is never told what he should have done, only about the behaviour he exhibited.

He may then be asked what effect the observed behaviour produced. When working in this fourth quadrant, it is effective practice to use positive or neutral, and avoid negative, language. It is also occasionally better to move away from the strict behavioural observation. The observed behaviour may have been that the person "spent most of the time looking at the floor". You can give this as observed behaviour and then get the person to deduce a solution. We have found it is sometimes better to say something like "try to have greater eye contact", but never appropriate to use a negative such as "stop looking at the floor".

The issue is that we are verging on coaching and moving out of the field of feedback.

So, what is 'feedback'?

For us, feedback is just information. It is specific information. It is information about observed behaviour. It contains no value judgments.

For example, you ask some open questions and probes that establish the background to the problem. An example of a probe used may be: "Tell me about what happened with Jo." It is directed at the person: "When the information was confused, you sought clarification." It may be personal from the giver: "You spoke so quietly that I could not hear you."

It is for the receiver to decide what to do with the information. Treat people as adults.

Feedback avoids 'should' or 'ought'. It just gives information to a person so he can decide what to do. Telling somebody what to do is not feedback.

Feedback is not praise – "great job!" – and it is not castigation

– “you messed up!” These are opinions. If you are going to praise someone, praise him. If you are going to reprimand someone, reprimand him. However, please don't think this is feedback.

Feedback has a purpose. Think of the results you want to achieve. If you want someone to keep doing what you have seen him do, use reinforcing feedback. If you want someone to stop doing something that is unproductive, use developmental feedback in the context of the total model – never in isolation. The power of developmental feedback depends on the situational context and the mood created by the giver.

Receiving feedback

Feedback is a two-way street. We found that people need to be competent at receiving feedback as well as giving it. We also found that people who are open to receiving feedback, and seek feedback, tend to be listened to when they give feedback, and also tend to be more skilled at giving feedback.

Our findings were that, as this feedback model is receiver-centred not giver-centred, defensive reactions are dramatically reduced.

- **Think about what you did in the situation being discussed.**

When saying what you did, be open, assertive and positive. We have noticed that, despite being asked ‘what did you do well’, some people state what they did ‘wrong’ and others are self-effacing.

- **Listen attentively and actively facilitate understanding.**

The advice is to be receptive and understanding. You don't have to accept, or even believe all the elements of feedback that you are told, but you should always receive it and understand it. Only then can you decide what to do about it. This means you need communication skills such as ‘seeking clarification’, ‘paraphrasing’ and ‘summarising’.



- **Always thank the person for the feedback.**

Thank the person irrespective of whether you liked it, or whether he was skilled. Feedback is a gift. Accept gifts graciously.

- **Learn how to give feedback from being given feedback.**

When in the feedback situation, listen to the language used and observe the feedback process. What was done well, what would you take from it, and what will you do differently?

Downside

There is a downside. We found that some people at all levels in the organisation have difficulty in identifying ‘behaviour’. Most people can identify ‘what’ was done, for example ‘the problem was solved’, but not the specific behaviours that indicated ‘how’ it was done.

In this context we might say that behaviour is observable; overt action by the person being observed, and would include what was said, its classification (for example, ‘giving information’, ‘seeking proposals’ etc) and its structure (such as the steps used in ‘constructive disagreement’). Behaviour also includes non-verbal elements such as gestures and facial expressions, and such behaviours as ‘matching’ and ‘mirroring’.

In professional, technical or practical assignments, it would include the way tools are held and used, the process of using equip-

ment, the handling of materials and safety measures.

Our findings are that the ability to describe behaviour in a specific domain is crucial to effective feedback.

Results

Our experience is that this model results in more feedback being given and the feedback is more accepted and even welcomed. This results in the feedback being more effective, and therefore contributes to a person's competence or performance. It seems to increase the motivation of the receivers of the feedback.

We have been told that using the feedback model has increased trust and respect in the manager-employee relationship. This may be, in part, because the person is being treated as a competent adult. It has enabled leaders to seek feedback, because followers trained in this model are confident and competent in giving feedback, and it has facilitated peer feedback.

This feedback model may not be ‘cutting edge’, but we have found it is a very sharp tool. To quote an old saying: ‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating’ – try it. ■

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal are co-founders of Learning Partners, a people development consultancy. Johnson can be contacted on +44 (0)1276 29978, at barryj@learningpartners.co.uk or via www.learningpartners.co.uk