

Try FeedForward Instead of Feedback

By Marshall Goldsmith

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Providing feedback has long been considered to be an essential skill for leaders.

As employees strive to achieve the goals of the organization, they 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, as well as input to managers on their leadership effectiveness. This “upward feedback” has become increasingly common with the advent of 360-degree 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 FeedForward — 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 FeedForward — that is, to listen to the suggestions for the future and learn as much as they can. The exercise typically lasts for 10 to 15 minutes, and the average participant has six to seven 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 FeedForward — 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 past, they are not allowed to give ANY feedback about the past. They are allowed only 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 FeedForward — 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 FeedForward 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!

11 Reasons to Use 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. FeedForward helps people envision and focus on a positive future, not a failed past. Athletes are often trained using FeedForward. 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. FeedForward, 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) FeedForward. 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 whom 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. FeedForward 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. FeedForward 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. FeedForward 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.” FeedForward 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-degree feedback reports for more than 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 use only 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. FeedForward 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 FeedForward from fellow team members (in one-on-one dialogues).
11. People tend to listen more attentively to FeedForward than feedback. One participant in the FeedForward 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 FeedForward, 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 FeedForward 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.



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MARSHALL GOLDSMITH FEEDFORWARD TOOL

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The purpose of the FeedForward Tool is to provide employees with suggestions for the future and to help employees achieve a positive change in behaviors selected *by them*. Instead of rehashing a past that cannot be changed – “feedback” – Jon Katzenbach (author of *The Wisdom of Teams* Harvard Business School Press, 1993) and Marshall Goldsmith coined “feedforward” to encourage spending time creating a future. We can change the future; we can’t change the past. Basketball players are taught to envision the ball going in the hoop and to imagine the perfect shot. By giving employees ideas on how to be even more successful, the FeedForward Tool can increase their chances of achieving success.

Successful people like getting ideas that are aimed at helping them achieve their goals and 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. The FeedForward Tool helps employees think about suggestions for the future and the ideas presented by others without critiquing suggestions or bringing up the past.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

The FeedForward Tool does not provide information that classifies people. There are no good-bad categories and the tool does not rank people in any way. All of the information on the report is derived from their “natural behavioral style.” It is a style that takes the least energy and effort, requires the least amount of concentration, and is usually the most pleasant to the employee. It is the mode that employees normally use to react and is most frequently exhibited outwardly in their behavior.

FOR THE EMPLOYEE

How To Identify Your Style

The FeedForward Tool divides all of the different behavioral styles into four main styles. These styles are not better or worse. Each of the styles has its own advantages and disadvantages. Below you will find an overview of the styles:

D-Style

D-styles are competitive, aggressive, decisive and results-oriented. They prefer to move fast, take risks and get things done now. D-styles also like to be in charge, control and have the power. They like change and challenges.

D-styles can also be impatient, overbearing and even rude. They are often not very good listeners and are prone to make snap decisions. Others may perceive D-styles as somewhat self-centered, demanding, blunt and overly aggressive.

I-Style

I-styles are talkative, sociable, optimistic and lively. They are people-oriented, spontaneous, energetic and enthusiastic. I-styles tend to be positive and good at influencing others.

I-styles can also be inattentive to details, overly talkative and emotional. They may over-promise because they are so optimistic and are eager to be popular. Others may perceive I-styles as somewhat careless, impulsive and lacking follow-up.

S-Style

S-styles are calm, helpful, patient, modest and laid back. They are eager to help, loyal and often make excellent team players. S-styles tend to be patient listeners, trustworthy, and balanced between tasks and people. They are very persistent.

S-styles need stability and security and, therefore, need help with change. They may be too willing to pitch in and at times are taken advantage of. Others may perceive S-styles as too slow, stuck on the status quo, indecisive, stubborn and even quietly resentful.

C-Style

C-styles are precise, logical, matter-of-fact, analytical and careful. They need the data, information and analyses. They are focused on tasks and ensure things get done correctly. C-styles tend to produce high-quality work.

C-styles may also focus too much on the details, becoming nitpicking, slow and losing the big picture. At times they get lost in the analysis, focusing too much on the trees and not the forest. Others may perceive C-styles as too critical, distant, pessimistic, and even cold.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

There is no one best style. Each style has advantages and disadvantages. Depending on the style, below are some things you could do to improve performance.

D-Style

Slow down, be more patient. Do not jump to conclusions or snap decisions. Listen to others more. Be more aware of how you impact others. Do not overreact.

I-Style

Talk less, listen more. Do not react emotionally. Do not over promise. Focus more on details. Follow-up.

S-Style

Be more assertive and aggressive. Speak out. Act now, think less. Keep your emotions under control. Do not be afraid of change and new things.

C-Style

Talk more. Decide and take action faster. Do not be afraid to make mistakes. Do not lose the big picture. Accept ambiguity.

WORKING WITH OTHER STYLES

Once you know what your style is, you need to know the *other* person's style in order to make the appropriate adjustments in your style. Below is a helpful checklist.

D-Style

Often appears to be in a hurry. Is direct, says what s/he thinks. May be blunt. States own opinions as facts. Interrupts others. May talk to many people at the same time. "What's the bottom line?" Is aggressive. Is demanding. "How does this benefit ME?" Very impatient. Becomes irritated easily.

I-Style

Is open and friendly. Talks a lot. Gets easily excited. Is animated. Talks about people s/he knows. Does not focus much on details. Does not listen for long. Does not pay close attention. May ask same questions several times. Jumps from subject to subject. Stays away from hard facts.

S-Style

Appears calm. Does not get easily excited. Listens carefully. Nods and goes along. Is easy-going. Asks questions and inquires about the specifics. Seems to have strong opinions but does not express them vocally. Appears thoughtful. Completely new ideas/things seem to make him/her uncomfortable.

C-Style

Appears reserved and somewhat timid. Is quiet. Focuses on details. Asks many questions. Studies specifications and other information carefully. Proceeds cautiously. Doesn't easily express disagreeing views. May have done homework on the topic. May be very critical; criticism based on facts, not opinions.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS: DO'S AND DON'TS WITH THE STYLES

Effective communication is critical in all types of interactions. Below you will find a helpful checklist to assist you in improving you effectiveness with the different styles.

Below is a checklist of what to do and what not to do with the different styles:

D-Style

Do:	Don't:
...provide direct answers.	...be emotional.
...be direct and specific.	...dominate.
...provide alternatives.	...go into all the details.
...ensure s/he "wins."	...provide too much information.
...give immediate feedback.	...try to control the situation.
...concentrate on the subject.	...talk too much.
...let him/her speak and listen.	...lose focus.
...focus on issues.	...take issues personally.

...show interest.	
...disagree only on facts.	
...enjoy the debate.	
...act quickly, s/he decides fast.	

I-Style

Do:	Don't:
...maintain positive atmosphere.	...talk about too many details.
...be a friend.	...fail to socialize.
...take time to chat and talk.	...bring up negative issues.
...have fun and act silly.	...fail to have fun.
...let him/her speak.	...set restrictions.
...give recognition.	...be too practical.
...allow him/her to express him/herself.	...be pessimistic.
...be more expressive.	
...be more enthusiastic.	
...focus on the big picture.	
...speak about people and feelings.	
...remember to follow up.	
...move closer.	

S-Style

Do:	Don't:
...proceed in logical order.	...forget your promises.
...slow down your presentation.	...make unexpected changes.
...provide the information he/she needs.	...be unreliable.
...present issues logically.	...forget to provide enough information.
...provide precedents to reduce uncertainty.	...move too fast.
...build trust.	...be impatient.
...focus on people.	

...ask specific questions to find out needs.	
...provide support.	
...remember fairness and justice.	
...secure commitment piece by piece.	
...be sincere, do not dominate.	

C-Style

Do:	Don't:
...listen carefully.	...move too fast.
...utilize written supporting materials.	...move too closely or touch.
...find out the key issues and focus on them.	...talk about personal issues.
...be patient, slow down.	...pressure.
...answer questions calmly and carefully.	...spend too much time with small talk.
...provide facts.	...lose patience providing information.
...give plenty of detailed information.	...expect decisions right away.
...be thorough; remember all relevant information.	
...slow down your presentation.	
...control your own activity.	