

# TELL ME SO I CAN HEAR



**A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO FEEDBACK  
AND COLLABORATION**

**By Ellie Drago-Severson and Jessica Blum-DeStefano**

*“The best leaders know how to help teachers grow. ... They know how to offer feedback so that teachers can improve practice and grow themselves in order to help students succeed. How can I make this happen?”*

*— High school principal*

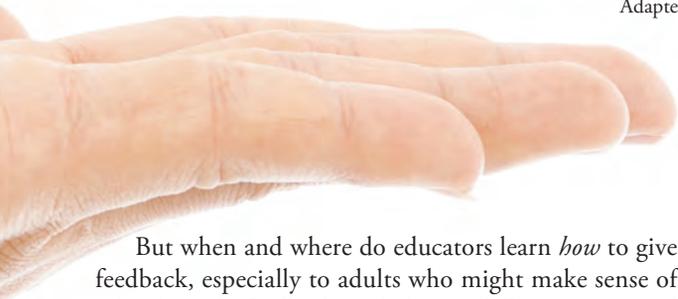
**F**eedback plays an important role in education. New teacher and principal evaluation systems, the Common Core State Standards, and Race to the Top initiatives, among others, underscore the critical importance of giving and receiving meaningful, actionable, and effective feedback to colleagues — regardless of their roles in schools.

## WAYS OF KNOWING: DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES

This table provides an overview of the different types of things that will feel supportive and challenging during feedback to adults with the four ways of knowing described in this article. Both support and challenge are integral to growth. When reviewing this list, think about what other kinds of insights, reflections, or questions you might have and list them in the space provided.

Way of knowing	Feedback supports	Feedback challenges	Reflections
INSTRUMENTAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concrete suggestions, models, and examples.</li> <li>Recognition of what went right and wrong.</li> </ul>	Encourage consideration beyond “right” solutions for teaching and leading, and scaffold abstract thinking.	
SOCIALIZING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appreciation for effort and contribution.</li> <li>Validation of progress and personal qualities.</li> </ul>	Invite expression of own beliefs about practice in safe contexts. Model and role-play conflict that does not threaten relationships.	
SELF-AUTHORING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledgement of competence and expertise.</li> <li>Opportunities to discuss own ideas, develop own goals, and critique and design initiatives.</li> </ul>	Encourage exploration of new and different ideas, values, and approaches — both professionally and personally.	
SELF-TRANSFORMING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities to collaboratively reflect on practice and explore alternatives, contradictions, and paradoxes (internal and systemic).</li> </ul>	Gently support management of the implicit frustrations and tensions of transformation and change.	

Adapted from **Drago-Severson (2009)** and **Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano (in press)**.



But when and where do educators learn *how* to give feedback, especially to adults who might make sense of others’ words, feedback, and ideas in different ways? And how might an educator’s own inclinations and orientations influence how others give and receive feedback?

A new and promising developmental approach to feedback, called feedback for growth (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, in press), builds on what the field has taught educators about effective feedback and offers something more. “Growth” refers to the expansion of educators’ internal capacities that enable them to better manage the complexities of learning, teaching, leading, and living (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, in press).

Specifically, feedback for growth involves intentionally differentiating feedback so that adults, who make meaning in qualitatively different ways, can best hear it, learn from it, take it in, and improve their instructional and leader-

ship practice. Research suggests that most adults make meaning with one of four different developmental systems, or ways of knowing: the instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, or self-transforming.

These ways of knowing are often described as the lenses — or filters — through which adults interpret their worlds, as they fundamentally influence how we make sense of our experiences, feedback, and relationships. More specifically, in the case of feedback, it might be even more helpful to think about ways of knowing as the audio frequencies with which we hear.

In other words, our ways of knowing predispose us to the kinds of feedback we find supportive or disconcerting, helpful or disorienting. Put more simply, our ways of knowing determine those aspects of feedback we can tune into and those we tune out (even unintentionally).

Understanding our own and others’ ways of knowing — and how this influences how we give and receive feedback for growth — can help educators expand what they already know about good feedback and learn more about what they still need to improve. A working understanding of adult developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano,

in press; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000) can also help educators — and educational leaders — reframe feedback as an opportunity to support colleagues’ internal growth *and* observable professional practice — as these things are ultimately and intimately related.

**A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON FEEDBACK**

The need to do feedback better is evident in the mixed results of current evaluation policies, which place feedback front and center on the reform stage but yield only limited returns in student achievement (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014).

The need for a different kind of feedback also echoes in the hopes and challenges of educational leaders who have shared their feedback experiences with us in university leadership preparation courses, professional development workshops, and other professional learning initiatives.

For example, in a 2014 survey of district and school leaders in New York City, 75% responded that giving feedback was the “most important skill” they want to build and grow, particularly in relation to having difficult conversations. This, we have learned, is a hope shared by educators in many different roles.

As one state-level educational leader explained, “Collaboration is a mandate — that’s why feedback is so important. ... We need to learn how to build capacity at all levels: with principals, assistant principals, and teachers.”

Feedback scholars have likewise pointed to specific challenges that mirror practitioners’ reflections and can complicate the exchange of feedback in both school systems and corporate contexts, including:

- A general lack of meaningful feedback or authentic collaboration;
- The extensive time demands of many formal evaluation systems (particularly in schools);

- The frequent lack of consistency among evaluators;
- The one-size-fits-all approach often adopted by feedback givers; and
- Colleagues’ overreliance on positive or superficial feedback (to protect relationships and/or the status quo) (Danielson, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2013; MacDonald, 2011; Marshall, 2013; Stone & Heen, 2014).

As this list makes clear, educators need to be able to more safely and comfortably provide each other with their best thinking about practice in order to shift the culture of feedback and enact meaningful change. This list does not, however, offer insight into why these things are so hard.

**WHY WAYS OF KNOWING MATTER**

While there are many important components to effective feedback (including budgeting of time, content expertise, and the larger organizational context), a developmental lens helps to illuminate the critical influence of an underrecognized form of diversity — developmental diversity — that runs through almost every team, school, or organization.

To illustrate, here is a brief look at the different ways adults with each of the most common ways of knowing — the instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming — experience feedback.

**INSTRUMENTAL KNOWERS:  
“Tell me what I need to do.”**

*“My principal helps me with her feedback because she provides me with models and step-by-step directions. I like to know what’s expected of me.”*

Adults with an instrumental way of knowing orient to the rules and generally understand their experiences — and feedback — in concrete, dualistic terms. In other words, instrumental knowers believe that there are right and wrong answers to problems, and right and wrong ways to do things, think, and behave.

They want to know, when receiving feedback, what they did right and what they did wrong. Giving detailed, concrete examples and specific models to emulate when offering feedback will be supportive to instrumental knowers.

When giving feedback, instrumental knowers likewise rely on policies and procedures and may have difficulty taking others’ perspectives in relation to a question or debate about instructional practice. From an instrumental knower’s perspective, what is there to argue about when there is clearly a correct way to do things?

**SOCIALIZING KNOWERS:  
“Make me feel valued.”**

*“My principal gives great feedback. She always makes a point to emphasize what I’m doing well and offers suggestions for improvement in caring ways that affirm my value to her and the school — not just as a teacher, but as a person. That means a lot to me.”*

**HOW TO CREATE A FEEDBACK CULTURE**

The following tips and reflective opportunities can help create a feedback culture for growth in your school or district:

- Share developmental ideas with colleagues. This can help establish a common language and lens for thinking and talking about feedback.
- Ask colleagues how you might best support them when offering feedback. What, for instance, would feel most helpful to them? Generally, people are willing to share their needs when they feel safe and respected.
- Consider how your own way of knowing might influence your preferences for giving feedback. Are there ways you might expand your style or approach to more effectively help colleagues tune in to your feedback?

## FEEDBACK STRATEGIES

The feedback literature highlights five key strategies for offering effective feedback. A developmental perspective can help educators deepen and broaden their understandings of these strategies.

	Strategy for effective feedback	Developmental extensions
1	<b>Individualize feedback for the receiver.</b>	Effective feedback is tailored to individuals' strengths and limitations, personalities and preferences, and developmental orientations and capacities (ways of knowing). Differentiating feedback — and asking adults what feels most supportive to them — can help educators better meet colleagues where they are in the psychological sense.
2	<b>Offer specific, focused feedback.</b>	While effective feedback is often specific and focused, it is also important to remember that people with qualitatively different ways of knowing will experience direct feedback differently — even if that feedback is offered in exactly the same way. Understanding this has implications for not only what is said, but how it is said.
3	<b>Maintain a positive, compassionate focus during feedback and other communications.</b>	Building — and modeling — the norms of safety, care, and collaboration require intentionality and an awareness of developmental diversity. Asking adults to share their preferences and needs for feedback can be a helpful starting place for building trust with individuals and groups.
4	<b>Ensure regular and ongoing feedback.</b>	A developmental perspective underscores the importance of meeting adults where they are psychologically and remaining present to them as they change and grow. A key insight here is that your feedback and communications may also evolve over time to keep pace with those in your care.
5	<b>Provide feedback recipients with opportunities to respond, reflect, and contribute.</b>	It is important to understand that adults will orient differently to self-direction, as taking a perspective on one's self and others — and voicing one's own opinions and suggestions — all require corresponding internal capacities.

Adapted from Drago-Severson (2009) and Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano (in press).

While socializing knowers have developed greater capacities for abstract thinking and relating, they feel responsible for valued others' feelings and, in turn, hold other people responsible for their own.

This means that socializing knowers often internalize supervisors' assessments as their own. In other words, they might think, "If you think I'm doing a good job [with my teaching or leadership], then I am. If you don't, then I'm not."

Since socializing knowers orient strongly to the human qualities of a relationship (e.g. kindness, care), it is important to acknowledge and attend to these when giving feedback to an educator with this way of knowing. Similarly, it may be helpful to understand that giving feedback — especially critical feedback — can be difficult for socializing knowers, as conflict is experienced as a threat to one's very self.

### SELF-AUTHORING KNOWERS:

#### "Let me demonstrate competency."

*"I appreciate my principal's feedback and value her perspective, although I might not always agree with or implement her suggestions. I especially appreciate the freedom she gives me to develop my own goals — and even offer feedback to her on her leadership practice."*

Educators with a self-authoring way of knowing have grown to have perspective on their feelings and interpersonal relation-

ships. Unlike socializing knowers, they have the internal capacity to prioritize them and reflect on them.

In addition, they can assess other people's expectations and judgments of them in light of their own. They have their own bench of judgment, so, when considering another person's feedback — whether a colleague or a supervisor — they decide for themselves what they are doing well and what they want to improve.

In a feedback exchange, self-authoring knowers value opportunities to voice their own opinions, offer suggestions and critiques, and formulate their own goals. On the other hand, self-authoring knowers cannot objectively see their own value propositions and ideologies so may have trouble taking in ideas and perspectives that are diametrically opposed to their own.

### SELF-TRANSFORMING KNOWERS:

#### "We can figure this out together."

*"My principal invites me into dialogue, and we encourage each other to consider things differently. The chance to exchange ideas and perspectives about teaching is what I value most about our feedback meetings."*

Increasingly, a small number of adults — about 9% to 10% of the U.S. population (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) — are developing a way of knowing beyond the self-authoring, which we call

the self-transforming way of knowing (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012).

Adults with a self-transforming way of knowing are more open to others' points of view, standards, ideologies, and beliefs. As both feedback givers and receivers, self-transforming knowers see interconnection as a strength and opportunity, and are able to examine issues from multiple points of view. They appreciate receiving feedback as a chance to grow and develop a bigger version of themselves.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Adults with each way of knowing have both strengths and limitations and require different kinds of supports and challenges in order to grow and learn. How should those responsible for giving feedback to educators across the developmental spectrum differentiate their feedback to better meet educators' needs? And how might these developmental insights shed new light on common feedback challenges, such as the ubiquity of positive and surface-level feedback, evaluators' overreliance on a single approach to feedback, and/or inconsistent feedback messages?

The table on p. 17 lists the developmental supports and challenges of the four ways of knowing and includes space to add reflections on each one.

A developmental lens can help educators deepen and extend some of the key strategies for effective feedback described in the wider literature for both business and education. The table on p. 20 offers developmental extensions of five feedback suggestions widely recognized by scholars (e.g. Buron & McDonald-Mann, 2011; Stone & Heen, 2014).

While the practical applications of feedback for growth are new and numerous, one hopeful truth informs all of these ideas: We can all continue to grow professionally and developmentally.

Much like Carol Dweck's (2007) concept of a growth mindset — an orienting belief that personal qualities and skills are not fixed, but rather can be developed over time through nurture and effort — a developmental perspective reminds us that adulthood can be a rich time of growth and learning. Indeed, if adults benefit from feedback, relationships, and contexts that meet them where they are in their ways of knowing and learning, the possibilities seem limitless.

A developmental approach to feedback can shed new light on the important work of educational leaders and feedback scholars across different disciplines and fields.

### REFERENCES

**Buron, R.J. & McDonald-Mann, D. (2011).** *Giving feedback to subordinates*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

**Danielson, C. (December 2010/January 2011).** Evaluations that help teachers learn. *Education Leadership*, 68(4), 35-39.

**Darling-Hammond, L. (2013).** *Getting teacher*

*evaluation right: What really matters for effectiveness and improvement*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

**Drago-Severson, E. (2004).** *Helping teachers learn: Principal leadership for adult growth and development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Drago-Severson, E. (2009).** *Leading adult learning: Supporting adult development in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & NSDC.

**Drago-Severson, E. (2012).** *Helping educators grow: Strategies and practices for supporting leadership development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

**Drago-Severson, E. & Blum-DeStefano, J. (in press).** *The art of feedback: Tell me so I can hear you*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

**Drago-Severson, E., Blum-DeStefano, J., & Asghar, A. (2013).** *Learning for leadership: Developmental strategies for building capacity in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Dweck, C. (2007).** *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

**Hallinger, P., Heck, R.H., & Murphy, J. (2014).** Teacher evaluation and school improvement: An analysis of the evidence. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 26(1), 5-28.

**Kegan, R. (1982).** *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**Kegan, R. (1994).** *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**Kegan, R. (2000).** What "form" transforms? A constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation* (pp. 35-70). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Kegan, R. & Lahey, L.L. (2009).** *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

**MacDonald, E. (2011, June).** When nice won't suffice: Honest discourse is key to shifting school culture. *JSD*, 32(3), 45-47, 51.

**Marshall, K. (2013).** *Rethinking teacher supervision and evaluation: How to work smart, build collaboration, and close the achievement gap* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

**Stone, D. & Heen, S. (2014).** *Thanks for the feedback: The art and science of receiving feedback well*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

•  
**Ellie Drago-Severson (drago-severson@tc.edu) is a professor of education and Jessica Blum-DeStefano (jessclum@yahoo.com) is a junior co-instructor in the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College, Columbia University. ■**