1 Feedback Fundamentals

Readers consider the rationale for shifting to a learning-focused feedback process. Readers will:

- Debunk common misconceptions of feedback based on traditional notions about the purpose of feedback.
- Learn definitions of key terms used throughout this book: learner, learning partner, learning object, information, and knowledge.
- Examine reflection questions about experiences with feedback.

Different individuals and teams use the feedback process for different purposes. This chapter describes how those involved in the feedback process use it to achieve deep learning. Not all feedback, however, aligns with the major premises described in this book. Such misalignment occurs because those engaged in the feedback process have developed practices based on misconceptions about the types and purposes of feedback and have not considered alternatives to their current practice. To help reconsider feedback as a process for learning, this chapter first examines some common misconceptions about feedback then suggests a reconceptualization of a learning-focused feedback process. Finally, it defines the key concepts related to this approach.

Feedback misconceptions

There are many popular misconceptions about the content of feedback in the literature.

Most misconceptions about feedback result from a more traditional view of feedback as information transmitted to a learner by a knowledgeable other as a part of assessment or evaluation. Several relevant ones are discussed below.

Misconception 1: Feedback occurs only in performance evaluation.

The conception that has long existed in the "feedback avoidant" (Carroll, 2014) culture of many public and private organizations is that feedback occurs only during performance evaluation. This is understandable since most supervisors provide feedback during the dreaded annual performance review. When feedback is associated only with performance evaluation, it will continue to be sparse. In its *2013 State of the American Workplace Report,* Gallup reports that 70% of American workers are not fully engaged in their workplace. Of the 12 attributes Gallup uses to assess

engagement, a factor consistently associated with high levels of organization performance, four directly relate to the presence of feedback. They are recognition or praise for doing good work in the past seven days; someone has talked to the employee about his progress; the presence of someone who encourages employee development; and opportunities at work to grow and learn within the past year (Gallup, 2013).

As the population of Millennials, who now make up a third of the workforce, grows as another third comprising Baby Boomers rapidly declines, the effect of employee engagement in the workplace is even more concerning, according to Gallup. In general, Millennials are less engaged at work than previous generations of workers. According to Gallup, "Millennials, who some have characterized as impatient to pay their dues, are most positive about growth and development opportunities at work" (p. 36). Millennials want frequent, honest feedback focused on their growth, unlike the feedback that generations of employees received in annual performance reviews. As the post-Millennials mature, exhibit more defined values and behaviors, and enter the workforce, they are likely to be resourceful, forthright, independent, and approach growth, learning, and engagement within organizations in yet different ways.

Misconception 2: People are feedback adverse.

Feedback is logical. Its absence in most organizations is illogical. Feedback as a process to promote growth is the fuel for improvement. When feedback is scarce, people lack knowledge to make changes in their practice. As a result, they may develop habits that are unproductive, inefficient, and difficult to change. When they have ongoing opportunity to understand expectations, have clear goals, know where they stand in relationship to expectations, and clarify actions for changes, they are able to be more self-directed, continue to improve, feel more engaged, and feel better about their own performance.

Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ, conducted a study for LeadershipIQ. He concluded that employees want more opportunities to interact with their supervisors and when they do interact, their performance increases. He also reports that two-thirds of employees say they get too little positive feedback and over half say that they get too little constructive criticism. Yet, even when they receive positive or constructive criticism, those employees report that the feedback is insufficient to help them either repeat the practice or correct it (WorldatWork, 2009).

Misconception 3: The feedback sandwich softens critical feedback.

Some management advisors recommend the use of the feedback sandwich, critical feedback pressed between two slices of positive feedback. The ratio of two *glows* for every *grow* is a common practice. Raoul Buron and Dana McDonald-Mann (1999) recommend a ratio of 4:1, that is, four points of positive feedback for every one of negative feedback "creates the most favorable feedback climate" (p. 27). Others suggest that more positive feedback "shields the learner and teacher by balancing positive and negative feedback and thereby achieving personal preservation" (Kogan, et al., p. 212). They note that some medical faculty members use the positive to build a resident's confidence, receptivity, and trust. In reality, it may confuse learners or minimize the importance of the feedback. As Kogan and colleagues acknowledge, some faculty members report a strong sense of duty to be constructive in their feedback and develop the residents' comfort by engaging them in negative or critical feedback.

This misconception makes a fundamental assumption that an external partner is determining what is positive and negative, and that evaluating is a necessary part of the feedback process. While common as a component of performance evaluations or review, the feedback sandwich also has the potential to miscommunicate the intent, lessen the learner's motivation to act on the information, and eliminates the learner's opportunity to learn how to be analytic and independent.

Misconception 4: People prefer positive to negative feedback.

The direction of feedback, positive or negative, has been the subject of multiple studies over the years, yet results are inconclusive that one direction of feedback is preferable to or has a greater impact than the other. Learners usually understand that the purpose of the feedback process is to promote their growth. To that end, they want to be a part of a process that helps them understand how to improve. In the workplace this statement is more true for Millennials than for earlier generations of employees. In a study conducted among young technology and health care workers who were identified as top talent and high potential within their organizations, Anna Carroll (2014) reports that these employees believe that "negative or improvement feedback" (p. 14) is a way to facilitate their ongoing learning. They believe that if they had more feedback that was productive and constructive they would succeed faster. "Clearly when it comes to feedback," she adds, "younger workers want substance over style. The idea that a boss is softening or qualifying the delivery of a message seems foreign to them" (p. 15).

In their meta-analysis of feedback in K–12 education, Hattie and Timperley (2007) report that "studies showing the highest effect sizes

involved [K–12] students receiving information feedback about a task and how to do it more effectively. Lower effect sizes were related to praise, rewards, or punishment" (p. 84).

In another meta-analysis of adult learner feedback interventions, Avraham Kluger and Angelo DeNisi (1996) found no difference in the direction of feedback, positive or negative, on its effects. In several subsequent experimental studies Kluger and DeNisi and others tested the effects of positive and negative feedback based on a hypothesis related to regulatory focus theory. Regulatory focus theory suggests two primary human drivers, promotion and prevention. Promotion-focused [adult] learners are interested in their growth and achievement of rewards. They view goals as desires and aspirations. Prevention-focused learners are more interested in responsibility and safety and are motivated by avoidance of pain and punishment. They view goals as necessities or obligations. When facing tasks that require creativity, people's motivation and performance increased with positive feedback. When facing tasks that required attention to detail and attention, people's motivation and performance decreased with positive feedback (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011).

Common though they may be, these misconceptions contain the seeds of an approach to feedback as a process rather than a product. Misaligned practices can, with some care, practice, and guided effort, be adapted or adjusted so they more closely align with practices recommended throughout this book.

Reconceptualizing feedback for learning

Researchers in multiple arenas of education — K–12 education, higher education, and professional education — identify feedback as a

significant factor in promoting effective teaching and learning practices. Yet, feedback is not so simple a process as it might seem. Christopher Watling, Erik Driessen, Cees van der Vleuten, and Lorelei Lingard (2014) point out that a 1996 meta-analysis demonstrated that feedback doesn't always have the effect intended. "It has become clear," they note, "that for feedback to be an effective facilitator of learning, it must be employed with great care" (p. 714).

This book is about how to employ care in thinking about and practicing the feedback process so that it results in learning.

John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007) conclude that feedback for K–12 students is among the factors with strong effect size influencing learning and achievement, and Jack Ende's (1983) study of feedback in medical education reinforces the significance of feedback as a learning tool. It makes sense, then, to strengthen the use of feedback to promote the effectiveness of professional learning. Alex Bols and Kate Wicklow (2013) cite a common saying "within the National Union of Students [university students] (United Kingdom) that 'feedback is the breakfast of champions.' Just as breakfast is the most important meal of the day, so feedback is one of the most important elements for learning" (p. 19). They acknowledge that many students feel starved for lack of adequate feedback in higher education.

In Learning Forward's (2011) *Standards for Professional Learning,* feedback is associated with implementation of learning. Effective implementation includes constructive feedback as a part of the process for supporting the application of professional learning. With feedback, a learner is able to recognize how he integrates new learning, examine its impact on clients, and identify approaches to refining and strengthening practice to achieve high levels of effectiveness and results.

The Feedback Process: Transforming Feedback for Learning rests on two driving assumptions: The first is that learning is constructed through a process of engagement, analysis, and reflection and influenced by the context within which learning occurs and is applied. In his introduction to *Psychology of Learning,* William Mikulas defines learning as a "more or less permanent change in behavior potential that occurs as a result of practice," (p. xi). He notes that learning results from actual experience rather than from other influences such as "motivational factors, sensory adaptation, fatigue, maturation, senescence, or stimulus change" (p. xi). The second assumption is that the context within which learning occurs and is applied influences learning. In their chapter, "Cognition and Learning," James Greeno, Allan Collins, and Lauren Resnick (1996) describe three foundational perspectives that influence understanding of and research about learning. The perspectives are behaviorist, cognitivist, and situative, and together they influence educational practice. The authors advocate looking at the perspectives pluralistically to achieve the greatest value for understanding education.

These assumptions align with the constructivist and social interaction learning theories and Paulo Freire's (2006) principle of pedagogy. Both assumptions acknowledge that learning requires more than transmission of information. Rather, learning emerges from the process of constructing knowledge from authentic or simulated experience that immerses a learner in multisensory opportunities to apply and practice learning. This conceptualization of feedback creates new learning opportunities, which are defined more fully through the following terms.

Terms to know

Language influences how humans think and act. In this book, there will be rare references to feedback givers and receivers. These terms suggest that feedback is a product to be exchanged and that it is primarily unidirectional. In such a view of feedback, receivers are often passive recipients; moreover, givers and receivers hold different status.

To convey more clearly that feedback is a process rather than product, and that learning is the primary purpose of feedback, the terms *learner, learning partner, learning object, information,* and *knowledge* are used. The meaning of these terms is important for understanding the feedback process described in this book and realigning practices to support that process.

Learner is the person who actively engages in and even directs the feedback process. In the context of this book *learners* and *students,* unless specified, are both terms to mean "adults who are in post-secondary or professional learning situations." For most learners, the most common form of feedback is that which is received from another, yet internal feedback, for most learners, occurs continuously. Internal response, when acknowledged, becomes a powerful source of insight and motivation for future action. Learners may engage in the process independently using covert or overt processes. Covert processes include thinking about and reflecting *on* (considering after), *in* (considering during), and *for* (considering for future use) practice and the metacognitive processes associated with the practice. Some learners make their covert thinking external using overt processes such as journaling, discussing their thinking with a learning partner, or recording data about their practice. Whether internally

> ### Terms for Understanding the Feedback Process
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> **Learner** is the person who actively engages in and even directs the feedback process.
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> **Learning partner** is someone who supports a learner in the feedback process.
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> **Learning object** is an artifact, experience, or pattern of behaviors that informs the feedback process and serves as evidence to analyze.
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> **Information** is simple and can be transmitted, recalled, and repeated without active engagement or higher levels of thinking.
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> **Knowledge** results from active construction of learning. Often associated with applying, analyzing, and evaluating situations to create new meaning or conclusions, generalizations, or theories for future action.

or externally generated through a process, the learner desires to refine, extend, alter, improve, or change understanding, skills, perspective, attitude, practice, and results.

Developing the capacity to engage in the feedback process, be self-analytical, reflect on practice, and refine practice are fundamental skills for all human beings. They are cultivated over time with opportunities to practice and with support from others within an

environment conducive to learning, risk-taking, and experimenting. As learners mature and become more independent in the learning process, the significance of the independent application grows.

Learning partner is someone who supports a learner in the feedback process. A learning partner is a trusted peer or knowledgeable other.

Learning partners may be peers, supervisors, experts, consultants, mentors, coaches, students, or others with whom the learner interacts. Many would describe learning partners as givers of feedback. Supervisors, for example, provide regularly scheduled feedback as designated by a performance appraisal system. In this role, their goals may be twofold — to assess and evaluate as well as to support growth and improvement. Sometimes supervisors assume the role of a coach or consultant to provide formative feedback that may or may not be a component of a formal performance appraisal. Teachers, trainers, mentors, coaches, content experts, and consultants provide feedback, sometimes formally or informally as a part of their responsibilities and agreements with learners. Executive or performance coaches share feedback with their clients as a routine part of the coaching relationship. In an ideal relationship, the learning partner shapes the conversation to engage the learner in generating his or her own feedback. This approach to feedback serves three purposes: It leads to improved practice; it also helps the learner cultivate the expertise to self-analyze using explicit criteria and observable evidence. Lastly, it reinforces the value and habit of self-reflection.

Generally, learning partners have both a map for the feedback process and clarity about their roles in it, although there are cases in which partners may engage in the feedback process without a plan to do so. Sometimes, feedback occurs spontaneously so learners can take advantage of a learning opportunity. In other cases, feedback is intended to protect the safety or integrity of a learner or his clients. In such instances, unanticipated or unplanned feedback from a trusted learning partner is appropriate and may be welcome. Learners who are committed to continuous improvement are always open to opportunities that contribute to self-awareness, growth, and change in practice. When learning partners view feedback as occurring naturally within their organizations and a purposeful part of continuous professional growth, they become more observant, more open to learning, and better able to seek evidence in their routine practice and use it during the feedback process.

Learning object is an artifact, experience, or pattern of behaviors that initiates the feedback process and serves as evidence to analyze. A learning object might include an observed event, client- or learner-generated work samples, performance data, or a reflection on an experience.

Learning objects serve as evidence of learners' practices and stimuli for the learning process. The objects provide a source of information that learners analyze to construct knowledge and plan change. Having multiple forms of evidence from different sources provides different perspectives and enriches the analysis component of the feedback process. While the best forms of evidence are observable, tangible, and from multiple sources, intangible forms such as feelings are valid if made explicit through language. Examples of learning objects are described in the scenarios below.

A teacher may observe nonverbal behaviors among students that provide

information with which the teacher makes a decision to alter course. While this feedback was not planned or sought, the teacher uses observed cues available within her environment as evidence within her continuous feedback process. Subsequently, she makes adjustments in her actions. Her observations of students' nonverbal cues serve as learning objects that informed her change.

An executive coach observes a leader facilitating the weekly management team meeting. During the visit to the team meeting, the coach is aware of the team members' silence, their sideways glances with each other, and their lack of eye contact with the leader. The coach is aware of these learning objects for the leader and the team. Stepping out of the silent observer role, he asks permission of the leader and team to make a public observation. They agree. His unplanned action initiates the feedback process in which the team and leader are able to construct together, through honest communication, knowledge about what is influencing the team's dynamics.

A mentor is co-teaching with a novice teacher. Their focus for the novice teacher is how to engage students in using evidence from the text. The novice teacher repeatedly accepts responses to her questions with no textual evidence. The mentor sees this pattern as a learning object. She steps next to the teacher and whispers a reminder about their shared focus. The teacher responds by asking for evidence from the text in her next question.

A supervisor meets privately with a staff member to explore possible reasons and ways to address the staff member's repeated lateness to the leadership team meetings. The supervisor greets the staff member and shares the purpose of the meeting. The supervisor asks, "In what ways can I support you to arrive on time to the leadership team meetings?" Together the staff member and supervisor examine the competing commitments and priorities the staff member is juggling and how to prioritize them so that none interfere with the leadership team meeting.

In the examples above, the learning objects ranged from student nonverbal responses and client behaviors to learner behaviors. Each presents an opportunity for immediate or later learning through some form of feedback. The forms of feedback differ in the examples, yet the primary purpose remains the same — learning that strengthens practice.

Information is simple and can be transmitted, recalled, and repeated without active engagement or higher levels of thinking. Dates, facts, concept labels, principles, research findings, or theories can be recited with shallow or no understanding of their meaning or significance. Considered a low level of learning by Norman Webb (1999) and Benjamin Bloom (1956), information is a recall of facts, procedures, rules, guidelines, policies, skills that serve as the foundation for higher levels of learning. In Lorin Anderson et al. (2001),

a revised approach to Bloom's Taxonomy, this lowest level is called *remembering.* By itself, this lowest level of learning — transmitted information that occurs most often from spoken or written sources — does not guarantee that the information is understood and acted upon, or integrated with other known information.

Knowledge, in this text, results from active construction of learning that occurs in complex thinking associated with applying, analyzing, and evaluating situations, experiences, information, data, or other learning objects to create new patterns, structuures, meaning, or conclusions, generalizations or theories for future action.

Building on John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid's work (2000) about information, Jan McArthur and Mark Huxham (2013) clarify the distinction between knowledge and information: "Knowledge is complex, contested and dynamic; there is a relationship between the knowledge and the knower and engagement with the knowledge is essential." They continue, "In contrast, information can be simpler; it can be passed over from one person to another with very little, if any active engagement" (p. 95). They go on to identify feedback not as simple information, but as knowledge

> with all of the attendant virtues and respect that deserves. If [adult] students are to be able to actively engage with feedback to be part of a dialogue, then that feedback cannot be presented, or regarded as a static canonical statement. By thinking of it in terms of knowledge to be discussed and interacted with by both parties [learner and learning partner(s)], we also introduce the notion that it is dynamic and

> contested: Not only do students have a right to challenge the feedback; they have a responsibility to determine for themselves its validity, usefulness and implication. (p. 95)

Knowledge is dynamic and situational; it is shaped by the context in which it exists, the learner, and others in the learning environment. It cannot be transmitted, only created and deconstructed. Knowledge is a product of reasoning about experiences and data. In the domains of learning described by both Anderson et al. (2001) and Webb (1999), knowledge occurs at the highest ends of the taxonomy or the deepest levels of cognitive learning. Constructing and deconstructing knowledge is the output of the feedback process that leads to more effective practice, and improved results are the outcomes of that feedback process.

Conclusion

Understanding the foundational concepts embedded in the feedback process described in this text will empower learners and learning partners to apply the feedback process to achieve transformation. Common misconceptions about feedback stem, most likely, from different notions about the purposes of feedback. Within the learning process, the role of feedback is clear. It is designed both to transform the learner and to cultivate learner expertise to engage in the highest form of feedback — self-generated, authentic, and unbiased feedback. With the ability to apply the feedback process at this level, a learner achieves self-determination and self-actualization that allows her to be deliberately critical in analysis and reflection of her own actions, words, and thoughts. Through honest, criteria-referenced assessment, a learner

develops ability to identify strengths and gaps, set goals for continuous improvement, and map out a plan of action to achieve her learning goals.

At the end of each chapter, readers will be able to use reflection questions in reviewing major concepts and considering how to apply them to practice. In addition, readers may refer to the questions to make their own meaning of the main ideas based on their own experiences.

Reflections

1. This chapter presents several misconceptions about feedback. How do the misconceptions presented, and others you might add, begin to illuminate the critical aspects of learning-focused feedback?

2. How do the key terms differ from your current understanding of them? How might those differences affect your reading of this text?

3. Who are your formal and informal learning partners? How do you engage them in the feedback process?

4. The distinction between information and knowledge is fundamental to understanding the feedback process. Drawing on your own experience, describe that distinction and provide an example of each.

5. Consider a recent feedback experience you had. Which aspects aligned with the feedback process described in this chapter? Which aspects differed from the feedback process described in this chapter?

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