Feedback Feeds Learning

The art of using feedback as a source of learning is often ignored by organizations. By moving beyond yearly performance reviews, we can start to exploit the whole development potential from the power of feedback. **by Julia Fadler and Kinga Illyés**

Even if one or a few excellent leaders set the right strategic direction, it will not be enough in today's unpredictable world. The key to keeping up with the fast-changing business environment is to decentralize decisions. Expert colleagues with direct day-to-day client contact – and therefore the most immediate source of feedback – must be empowered for change. Rapid reaction is key even in larger-scope development or improvement projects. That implies that companies largely rely on the excellence and continuous development of its employees, who are steering the direction bottom-up with their initiatives. We see feedback as one of the most powerful sources of learning, and as a central topic when we talk about agility. We invite you to think about feedback in a different way and will provide you with some ideas on how you could make the first steps toward developing the feedback culture in your organization.

What is new – what stays the same?

Feedback processes in more agile organizations follow the pattern of »sense and respond.« Annual feedback in the form of pre-planned meetings between managers and subordinates is replaced by regular learning conversations among peers and between all levels of hierarchy. In this context, the role of leadership changes significantly. Whereas traditionally, a leader's job was to create a good performance evaluation process and to be an excellent feedback giver himself/herself, the key role of leadership in more agile organizations is to create a different corporate culture. A new way of thinking enables people to be open towards feedback and ready to share their opinion whenever needed. Only if people feel safe enough to speak up and to admit faults is learning possible, so the new challenge is how to create this containing environment to foster feedback. While leaders' attention is shifted towards creating a new feedback culture, it remains equally important that leaders still promote, practice and expect to apply the golden rules of having feedback. Shaping a conversation in an appreciative and respectful way is the basis for human interaction. Phrasing feedback in an acceptable way remains as important as before and must be practiced by everyone in the organization.

The following table delivers a comprehensive overview comparing the key features of feedback in both a traditional and in a more agile organization.

»Interesting approach – how can I start right from here?«

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First steps to create a new feedback culture

The most challenging aspect of this transformation is that common learning needs more openness to exchange perspectives and more willingness to change and grow accordingly. There are a lot of opportunities where you can start from – as an inspiration, we put together a »leader's shortlist to create a new feedback culture«: Gain allies and involve your team members to define together the pillars of the feedback culture you want to build:

— Try to get a feeling of where the topic of feedback stands in your team/department, answering the following questions: How often have you/your closest colleagues proactively asked for feedback in the last two months? What does that result tell you about learning in your organization? What works well already; where do you see opportunities for improvement? You might want to consider feeding that back to your colleagues, and with that, creating a feedback loop itself.
— Develop and agree on »rules we want to give ourselves for providing feedback« in your team.
— Go beyond sharing inspirational input about feedback; use it as a starting point for a conversation about your own practices in the team (e. g. next jump feedback app, radical candor).
— Foster a team atmosphere where everyone feels comfortabe speaking up by explicitly inviting all team members to share their ideas/thoughts on a topic of interest.
— Support the team, showing that the rules agreed on really come to life – especially by thanking others for feedback you received and referring to »feedback success stories.«
— Model the new behavior that you want to see in others – ask for different perspectives and feedback regularly, i. e. »What could I do better to be more effective as a leader?«

Set frameworks to make sure the new way of feedback becomes a habit:

Time
Bear in mind that deep, honest feedback needs time; prolong meetings with an additional 15 to 20 minutes dedicated to feedback.

Space
Have more face-to-face meetings, book a meeting room and book it for ten minutes longer, so the team can be on their own without being interrupted.

Platform
Institutionalize feedback in platforms that you already have in place, i. e. make feedback loops part of your meetings: »On a scale from 0 to 10 … How well was our time together spent here today? What could we do differently the next time to be more effective?« Promote new platforms e. g. demo sessions and rapid prototyping to use a great opportunity to obtain early feedback and practice evaluation for your team.

Channel
Could be in-person, a feedback app or a board with post-its; the important thing is to introduce the right channels of feedback aligned with the goals you set for feedback.

Stay ready to explore

Curious about the opportunities a new feedback culture can bring along? Very good; we promise you will be surprised about the bold ideas dozing in your organization. ●

The rebirth of performance evaluation

Traditional feedback approach	New feedback approach
Feedback is »another leadership task« Understanding feedback mainly as a task to be done, sometimes even »because HR asks us to do that.«	**Feedback is important** Common understanding that feedback is necessary to learn and grow together.
Pre-planned feedback Feedback mainly happens during the annual appraisal interview once or twice a year.	**Feedback on demand** Feedback is provided regularly and immediately after specific experiences.
Consequences of negative feedback The feedback recipient is trying to hide errors and protect him/herself during the evaluation talk; the stake is often the promotion, pay raise, etc.	**Failing early** Consequences are not dramatic; because small steps are being taken, everybody knows that it is a constant learning process.
Feedback providers: Managers Feedback is typically provided one-way down the hierarchy, from the leader to the employee.	**Feedback providers: Everyone** Feedback is exchanged across the organization – by managers, between peers, up the hierarchy.
Goals are not always clear/transparent Quite often, goals are not really used to steer performance. Instead of transparency about goals and expectations, feedback often happens »behind closed doors.«	**Transparent goals as a source of feedback** Clearly set and transparent goals are used as a source of feedback, especially on a team level.
Focus of feedback – individuals Feedback is focused on the employee's performance in the recent past.	**Focus of feedback – individuals and performance as a team** Multiple focuses of the regular feedback: the actual delivery, the individual development, lessons learned about the cooperation in the team.
Golden rules for feedback Appreciation, respect, specific insights about behavior.	**Golden rules for feedback** Appreciation, respect, specific insights about behavior.