



Feedback – A Gift We Dread?

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Feedback - A gift we dread?

How often do we hear the phrase “feedback is a gift” – yet it is still something most of us dread – both to give it and receive it. For organisations across the globe who are keen to instil a feedback culture, this is a critical challenge to overcome.

We also hear many businesses talk about high performing teams and the need for results-oriented conversations, and feedback is a critical element of these great discussions that many people lack the skills for. So we face a challenge – not only do people have a fear reaction to feedback, many also lack the skills to give and receive it well.

This begs the question – what can we do about all this? The good news is, there is plenty of evidence to suggest we can get better and more confident with giving and receiving feedback.



In this guide we’ll look at some of the evidence behind the challenges, theories and practical models you can employ to develop your own and others’ skills in giving and receiving feedback - ranging from neuroscience and mind-set through to preparation and structure.



Start with the brain

The wonders of neuroscience mean we can see how the brain is responding to situations, such as being offered and given feedback. Watching how certain areas of the brain react, we can get a good idea of why feedback is a challenge for human beings. And when we think back to our beginnings as hunter-gatherers, we can explore why it is that we are so sensitive to threatening situations – even though the threat has changed from being hunted by a sabre-tooth tiger, to being given some feedback we may not like!

One thing is for certain from the brain scans and reactions observed: We do not like to be wrong. Realising we have said or done something wrong, or that our understanding of something is incorrect, is a threat to our social status - our fear of looking stupid, or not being liked or respected.

Our brains like certainty and predictability – so realising that there is uncertainty (I wasn't right in my thinking, so now should I be uncertain of everything?) and a lack of predictability (if I didn't know I got it wrong this time, how will I ever know again?) – is all very unnerving. Because of this, even hearing “can I have a word,” or indeed “I've got some feedback for you,” can be an immediate panic inducer.

Check your mind-set

In her work on mind-set, Carol Dweck has identified that people with a more fixed mind-set: Those who believe intelligence and ability is fixed rather than something that can be developed, tend to view feedback as a threat. **This is different to the growth mind-set, which is the belief we can learn and develop skills. People with a growth mind-set will see feedback as an opportunity to learn and get better, so it's not such a threatening situation.**

It's interesting to note that this is not a binary concept – each of us is not simply a fixed or growth mind-set person. Instead we each have things we view as fixed – you can either do it or you can't, and other things we view as possible to learn and develop. Consider your own beliefs. To what extent do you believe someone can learn and develop:

- An ability to do the job you're doing now?
- Presentation skills and gravitas?
- Capability in art?
- Skills in sport?
- Creative thinking?



The point is that we have different beliefs about each of these things and more. What if you broke down the job you're doing now into its component parts? Are there some aspects you might have more of a fixed or growth mind-set about? Think about how you might therefore respond differently to feedback on those areas where you have more of a fixed mind-set. And if you were giving someone else feedback on something you thought they might struggle to learn and develop – how might that change the way you think about that feedback?

It's a lot more threatening to give or receive feedback on something we think can't be learned.

It's not all bad

Sadly, most of us have associated feedback with someone criticising us. The fact is that the best feedback is an exploration of what went well and what could be better – which is a great learning experience and indeed a gift if taken in the right way.

But if we just expect to be told what was wrong with our work, the fear kicks in. And of course even if we've been given lots of "what went well" comments – we'll usually only remember the negatives anyway (that's down to our brains again, as our emotional, fear-based reaction to this criticism makes it more memorable).

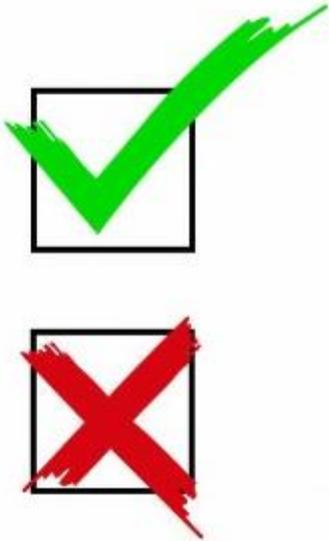
So it becomes a constant cycle of fear, hurt at the criticism, more fear for future feedback conversations, and so on.

What can we do?

Businesses have tried various approaches to help people acknowledge and respond to these challenges, which we can all learn from, and the best starting point is to help everyone understand what's really going on in our brains.

From our experiences with coaching and development programmes, we find many people think they are alone in what they find really difficult. First time managers to CEOs will tell us they feel really uncomfortable giving and receiving feedback, as though they are confessing to a dark secret. It makes them feel so relieved to know most others have the same challenges, and that there are ways to understand why and overcome the fear.

Various banking, public sector and retail organisations have found great success in explaining this neuroscience to their managers to help them better understand and address the challenges we've explored here. It's like finally learning how to use that tool or bit of kit you've had for ages: Your own and others' brains.



What not to do

A retail and leisure organisation created company-specific videos showing how to - and how not to - give and receive feedback.

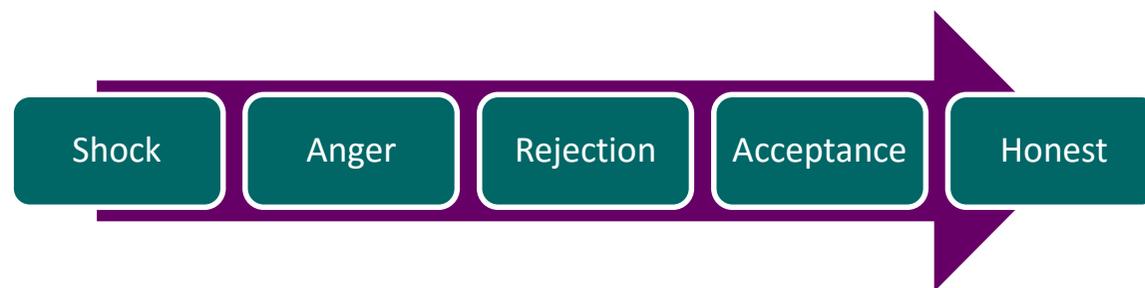
Far from those awkward old fashioned videos that show a joke of a David Brent style feedback conversation – these videos showed how many people do give and receive feedback – and how these normally accepted behaviours are not as helpful as we might hope.

The response from people managers at all levels was very encouraging – it was the first time they realised their usual approach wasn't necessarily helping them.

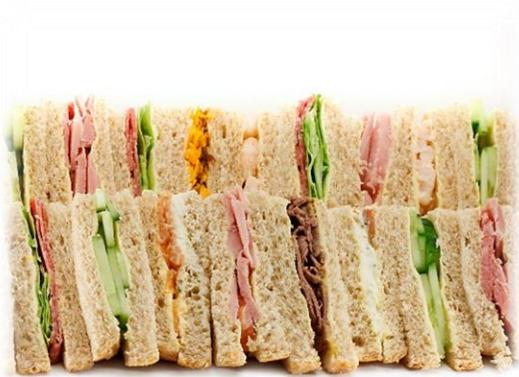
SARAH

One global restaurant brand helped everyone understand the natural human reactions to feedback. Using the SARAH model, managers came to understand why a simple statement of something not done well could create a strong reaction in others.

SARAH stands for the stages we can often go through when we receive feedback: Shock, Anger, Rejection (or defensiveness), Acceptance and finally, if we choose it, Honest effort to do something with the feedback.



Managers were encouraged to remind people of this when sharing 360 degree and appraisal feedback, so that everyone could notice and acknowledge their reactions and work towards a more positive way of thinking.



Where's the positive?

Thankfully most businesses we work with have stopped teaching the feedback sandwich! That idea of giving positive, then negative, then positive feedback, in order to cushion the blow, has never really worked. And if it did work for some people at one point in time, it's now come to be expected.

We hear time and again of classic feedback sandwiches where the person receiving the feedback is ignoring everything positive at the start, because they're just waiting for their manager to get to the negative stuff. The fear has kicked in and all of the positives have not even been heard.

So if we don't want to use the feedback sandwich to give praise and recognition, where does the positive stuff come in?

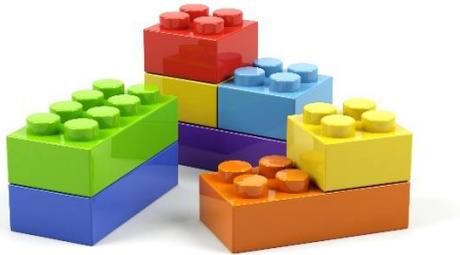


Every development programme or workshop that mentions feedback has most people thinking of the most uncomfortable and distressing criticism they might need to give.

This can often mean that the content on praise gets hijacked, when in reality we need to give plenty of feedback – both what went well and what could be better next time. What is helpful in highlighting this is the important ratio of positive to negative experiences that makes a difference to our overall wellbeing: The Losada Ratio.

Losada & Fredrickson's research with personal and working relationships suggested that we need around three to five positive experiences to every one negative experience, in order to feel the relationship is going well and feel good. This is an alarming ratio for managers who realise they tend to catch people doing things badly, rather than catch people doing things well. It's alarming too for managers who don't invest time in getting to know their teams, asking them about their weekends, spending time exploring their career aspirations, supporting them when times are tough and being vulnerable with them – all positive experiences for the teams that are often being missed.

Whilst there has been heavy criticism of the exact mathematical basis for Losada's number, there is no doubt that we need more positive experiences than negative in order to flourish. So this is a great way of putting the positives back into our thinking on feedback.



Preparation and structure

Every business that encourages their managers to build capability and confidence in giving feedback, introduces a model and recommends preparing in advance. The great thing about preparation and structure is that they avoid two bad habits that all of us can fall into when giving feedback: **Talking round the houses** and **being too direct**.

Many people commit one or both of these in the same feedback conversation – at first not really getting to the point and then possibly getting frustrated and telling the person exactly what they should be doing differently in a harsh tone. Chris Argyris' work on the difference between what we know we should do, and what we actually do, has been invaluable for helping people make better choices when preparing feedback – as we might all think we'll make the feedback specific and helpful, yet when we're in the moment, that doesn't really happen.

Here are the most frequent models or structures we've seen used for preparing and structuring feedback, to avoid those mishaps:

- **AID** – Action, Impact, Development – “I noticed you did X, which had the impact of Y, so I'd suggest in future you do Z.”
- **SAID** – Standard, Action, Impact, Development – “As we've talked about before, my expectation is A. In contrast to that, I noticed you did X, which had the impact of Y, so I'd suggest in future you do Z.”
- **SBI** – Situation, Behaviour, Impact – “In the team meeting on Tuesday, I noticed you said X, which I'm concerned about because....”

The theme with all of these models is the importance of describing not only what the person did, but also why you're giving this feedback – i.e. the impact of the behaviour. Yet there is a gaping hole in all of these models, in that the process is not two-way.

We are therefore big fans of the ASIA model – Ask, Specific, Impact, Action – where there is no set format or order of these items being used in conversation – but asking questions is a critical component.

Ask

Specific

Impact

Action



In fact, the model is often drawn as follows to show there is not set order, and highlight the importance of asking questions throughout the conversation.

“I noticed in the meeting on Tuesday that you said X, do you recall that?”

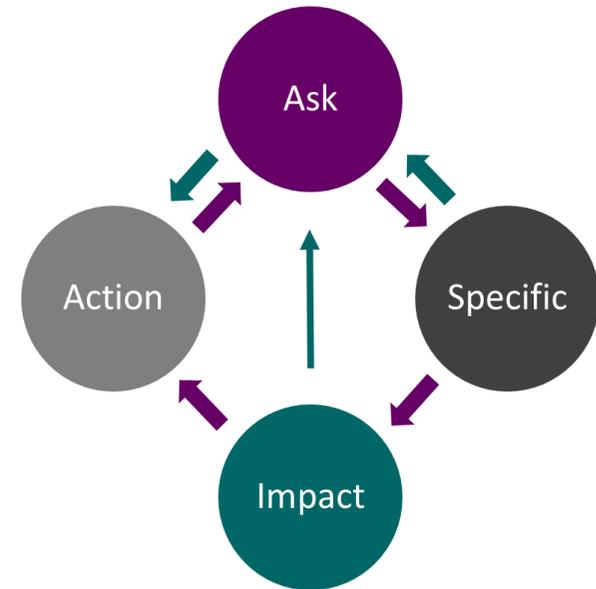
What impact do you think that might have had on the team?

I was concerned that it had the impact of Y.

What are your thoughts on that?

It would be helpful if in future you did Z, what do you think?

What will you do now?”



There is more to explore in bringing this model to life, and helping people prepare most usefully for their feedback conversations, when of course we can't predict what people will say in response to the questions! And that's the benefit of introducing this idea in a workshop or 1:1 development conversation, where we can explore the practical realities of using this structure.

It's reassuring to know that organisations who have used applied neuroscience in their development workshops with managers, have received great feedback and behavioural change measurements from the teams. When we better understand the brain and the natural human reactions to giving and receiving feedback, we can all better prepare and be far more effective.

If you would like support in encouraging a feedback culture in your business, and helping people better understand how the brain works to be more effective leaders and managers, we'd love to have a chat with you. As you can probably tell - we love this stuff!

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about Totem

People at their Best

build:

We support you in uncovering your vision, mapping talent and developing end to end processes to manage talent within your organisation.

Focusing on profits through people



engage:

We help you to engage individuals and teams—supporting change, gaining commitment to your vision and retaining your highest performers.

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We design and deliver exceptional, focused and blended development, allowing each individual to grow in their role, capability and motivation.

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people at their best

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We're nimble

"What sets Totem apart? It is their ability to be very thorough in their approach whilst at the same time willing to offer innovative suggestions that can be implemented in a time and cost effective way. Would I recommend them to others? Without question!"

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"I'd definitely recommend working in partnership with Totem – I say partnership, as this is exactly how they operate. They seize every opportunity to learn more about your business and by doing so are able to support projects with this insight, often going above and beyond the original scope."

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The result of this is a powerful and thought provoking blend of theory and practice which demystifies the art of communicating and influencing effectively in formal and informal situations."

Talent Manager HML