THE POWER OF FEEDBACK

35 Principles
for
Turning Feedback
from Others into
Personal and Professional
Change

JOSEPH R. FOLKMAN

WILEY

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To my family, who continue to give me feedback and patiently wait for change.

Foreword

In 1798, Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote:

> "O wad some Power the giftie gie us
> To see oursels as ithers see us!
> It wad frae mony a blunder free us . . ."

Burns clearly saw the need for people to develop more accurate views of their behavior, because it would free them from committing many of life's mistakes. The solution that Burns' poem suggests, however, is for some divine Power to provide that wonderful insight. As far as I can tell, that has not been happening for the great majority of us.

I would like to believe that Burns would rejoice to learn, some 200 years later, that people are seeing the same need he saw, but they are discovering powerful and practical vehicles to make that occur, without troubling the divine, cosmic Powers to take the responsibility. Burns probably could not have envisioned the day described in the book you are about to read. He would be amazed at the practical tools that have been created to help us shrink the gap between how we're seen and how others see us.

Some books are worthy of being recommended simply because of their subject matter. Their topic is of such import that any treatise presenting new ideas and a useful way to frame the subject would be worth the investment of time and money to read. The topic of feedback fits that description. There is no greater force to improve the quality of human relationships or improve the way organizations function than to multiply the amount and improve the quality of feedback.

Other books are worthy of being recommended because their content is of great practical use, such as when an author takes an otherwise abstract, obtuse subject and turns it into an actionable, practical set of things to do. Joe Folkman has accomplished that task by presenting key findings from his long career in helping individuals and organizations to develop feedback-rich environments. He has devoted his career to the important issue of helping individuals and organizations change through the use of a variety of surveys and feedback instruments. But his message goes far beyond the creation of better instruments to address the more important issues of how such instruments are to be used and the degree to which dedicated follow-up should occur. Therein lies the truly important contribution of his book. Better yet, he presents compelling statistical evidence for what happens when these steps are taken.

Finally, some books contain information of high value, but the effort required to extract that information often exceeds the value derived. I predict that most readers will be entranced by the extensive illustrations and examples from Joe Folkman's consulting background that clarify these principles and make them come alive. Ordinarily, employee surveys and feedback tools would rival macroeconomics for sheer lack of excitement, but in this case, the author has made this topic highly engaging and accessible.

So, here you have the best of everything—an important topic; a talented, entertaining, and highly qualified author; content that is practical, and a text written in an easily comprehended manner. Enjoy.

John H. "JACK" ZENGER

Acknowledgments

This book emerged as a result of the work I have done in assessing individual effectiveness over the past 30 years. Helping organizations to design, gather, and process feedback has provided an opportunity for me to see many people make significant and meaningful changes. Thousands of brave and courageous people over the years have contributed greatly to the content of this book. Their ideas, experiences, and feedback have been invaluable to me. To begin with, this book would not have been possible without the many supportive clients who provided a learning laboratory for testing and refining this change technology. To all those who worked with us and provided us with insights and new opportunities for learning: thank you.

Special thanks to Gene Dalton who wrote the Foreword to my earlier book, *Turning Feedback into Change.* Gene has since passed away, but his example and extraordinary work live on. Many of the new ideas in this book came out of research I did with John H. "Jack" Zenger presented in our recent book, *The Extraordinary Leader.* I have truly appreciated working with Jack and acknowledge his contributions. We enjoyed working together so much, we decided to create a firm to nurture and build on our original research.

I appreciate all my colleagues at Zenger | Folkman, our current firm, where many of the ideas in this book took shape. I also appreciate many friends and colleagues who have shared their experiences and learning throughout my career, which have contributed to this book.

I also express appreciation to Trent Price, for his work in editing the manuscript and to Jenny Gildea for her work

preparing the manuscript. And I gratefully acknowledge Matthew Holt and Kate Lindsay at Wiley for their enthusiasm and support of this project.

Finally, thanks to my wonderful and supportive wife, Laura, and our five children, who continue to have unwavering faith in me and my abilities.

Introduction

Feedback can be very powerful. Those who look for and accept it position themselves to be more competent and capable. Those who resist, reject, or avoid it doom themselves to the limitations of their own personal insights —which may be right or wrong, but they will never know. They fail to see the power in feedback.

Without feedback we are flying blind. Others see things we can't see. In performance assessments designed to measure individual effectiveness, it has been found that those who are the least effective at accurately predicting their strengths and weaknesses are the individuals themselves.

In an assessment looking at over 1,000 managers, we asked direct reports if their managers actively looked for opportunities to get feedback. Only 16 percent of managers had consensus from their teams that "actively looking for feedback" was a strength. Of 49 items assessing effectiveness, this item was one of the most negative. In another survey, we asked thousands of people if they regularly received feedback on their performance. Almost half of the respondents (46 percent) answered the question negatively or neutrally. Most people do not feel they lack feedback from others on how they could improve their performance at work, how they could be a better parent, how they could be a more considerate and caring spouse or friend, or simply how they could become a better person. For many people, the typical reaction to new feedback is to say, "So what, I'm too busy to do anything about it anyway."

To the question, "In the past month has someone given you feedback or made a suggestion on how you might

improve?" the vast majority of us would answer, "Yes." But to the follow-up question, "Have you improved or made any changes because of that feedback?" we would likely reply, "No." Likewise, if you ask people, "Do you know of any ideas you could implement that would make you more effective?" most would reply, "Yes." But most people feel they can only juggle so many balls at a time, and so many of those ideas remain unimplemented.

Most people receive much more feedback than they are willing or able to implement. They receive feedback from many sources, including books, articles, friends, coworkers, bosses, spouses, and children. To cope with all this information, some stop listening; others become defensive. Some blame others, and others simply ignore or don't understand the feedback. The problem of receiving more feedback than we can use reminds me of an agricultural joke I was once told:

An agricultural consultant goes to visit a local farmer. After observing the operation carefully, the consultant asks the farmer if he would like some suggestions on how to improve his farm. The farmer replies, "No, I already know dozens of things I should be doing to run this farm better, and I don't do any of those. Why should I add more to the list?"

A growing trend is to provide people with more and more performance feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. Companies institute performance appraisal processes with more feedback, including upward evaluations, 360-degree or four-way feedback, and peer evaluation systems. These companies hope to involve more people than just the boss in assessing a person's performance. The idea behind the trend is the more information and feedback people receive, the more effective they will be.

Getting feedback from multiple sources is an effective way to discover the strengths and weaknesses in our performance. Feedback frequently helps us understand the attributes we would not otherwise notice, but which may be obvious to others. Although people are receiving more feedback, changes in their behavior do not seem to be taking place. As with antibiotics that are used too frequently, people quickly begin to build immunities to feedback and resist making changes.

Also, people who receive an abundance of helpful feedback early in their careers often find, later in their careers when they become managers, the feedback seems less open, honest, and straightforward, and more politically loaded. To help managers obtain more open and candid feedback, many organizations now ask employees to complete anonymous surveys for each manager at several key points: those who manage the manager, the manager's peers, and those who report to the manager. But, although the feedback process has become an increasingly popular way to "send the message," frequently the people receiving the feedback still do not "get the message," nor do they change as a result of the process.

The purpose of this book is to help you accept, prioritize, plan for, and change as a result of the feedback you receive. The approach I use has been refined through my experience in working with thousands of people who have received performance feedback. The people who change as a result of feedback are not necessarily stronger or smarter than those who don't, but by following a few simple principles and steps, lasting and effective change is possible.

WHY THIS BOOK?

As I considered writing this book, I thought about how I could provide new insights and expand on the ideas described in my first book, *Turning Feedback into Change.* Many people who read that book indicated it had been very helpful. For over 10 years, it has guided people to process and apply the feedback they receive. In fact, my personal mission during the first 20 years or so of my career—largely in the area of designing feedback systems and providing people with feedback—might best have been characterized as "helping people figure out what is wrong and then fixing it." During those years, I followed that mission diligently. In 1999, Jack Zenger and I began a detailed analysis of hundreds of thousands of feedback surveys collected over many years. Our research uncovered some powerful new insights. Our analysis led me to verify some of the advice I had been giving to clients over the years, but it also caused me to question other advice. For this reason, I felt a strong need to write a new book and share some of these amazing findings.

For most people, giving and receiving feedback has been more of a negative than a positive experience. Although most feedback results contain both positive and negative feedback, by and large most people focus on the negative and believe that the key to self-improvement is found in fixing their weaknesses. In our research, we found that the key to predicting highly effective people was not the absence of weaknesses, but rather the presence of a few profound strengths. To be perceived by others as highly effective, people need to have strengths. We also found that successful people do not have to be perfect at everything, but they do need to be highly effective at a few important skills. Feedback not only ought to help people discover what they need to do to improve, but it also ought to help them understand what skills they could develop into strengths. A key to being highly successful is doing some things well. But

investing all our time and energy in fixing our weaknesses does not necessarily help us build strengths. The results of our research made it clear that developing a moderate strength into a profound strength would have a far greater impact on performance than fixing something that was slightly below average.

Change is difficult. It takes great commitment, effort, and practice. The one key ingredient that is an absolute necessity for change to occur is passion. We can't change something that others want us to change when we halfheartedly agree to "work on it." So, rather than working on fixing issues that you don't really care about, why not find an issue for which you have a passion? Too often, people feel they need to work to change issues that others want them to change. This attitude represents compliance, not commitment.

The process of going from poor performance to good performance is more straightforward than going from good to great. It is usually very clear what needs to be done to improve poor performance or to overcome "fatal flaws." Weakness, errors, or problems are easily seen and the solutions are often intuitively obvious. But the process of going from good to great is much harder. People talk about "building strengths," but in our research we learned that the process is different. The great learning from the analysis was that people who have exceptional skills in a specific area are also skillful in performing some of what we call "companion behaviors." What creates exceptional ability is the interaction of multiple skills. We also found that improvement in companion skills would have a remarkable impact on perceived performance.

Everyone seems to have some skill or ability that might be thought of as a gift or strength. We seem to gravitate toward that activity whenever we have a choice. Our

continual approach of accepting our gifts but working to improve our weakness has many of us trying to change things we don't care much about, but we dutifully go about trying to do it anyway. In a series of recent seminars, I asked people to write down the one skill that, if they performed it with a high level of expertise, would make the most difference in their ability to be successful in their current job. It was not difficult for people to identify this skill. After they had written down the skill that came to mind, I then asked them to review performance objectives that had been established with their managers six months before. Only about 20 percent of the people were working on improving the one skill that would help them the most. This book explores the process of moving from fixing weaknesses to building on strengths.

When I was a teenager, I attended a party in which someone demonstrated a magic trick called "broom over." Everyone was seated in a circle, and a person in the center of the circle held a broom. Another person would walk into a closet, where he or she could hear, but not see what was going on. The person in the center of the circle would hold the broom over the head of someone sitting in the circle and say, "Broom over, broom over who?" Then the person in the middle would sit back down in the center of the circle, and the person waiting in the closet would come out and guess the person who'd had the broom held over his or her head. The person holding the broom and the person in the closet were 100 percent accurate.

We tried to figure out how the trick worked. We came up with some very complicated ways of prediction, such as, "It's every fourth person to the right, switching from girl to boy each time." It took a long time for us to figure out how the trick worked, but in the end the process was simple. The last person to laugh was it. The subtle difficulty of the game was that those in the circle determined the next person who

would have the broom overhead. Such magic tricks look complicated, but in the end they are always very simple. Most people fail to see the subtlety of how the trick works.

Trying to figure out how to be successful in life is very similar to watching this magic trick. Things often look very complicated. People try to think up very complex explanations. But, in my experience, feedback is one of those very simple explanations to help us understand a complex mystery. It seems so simple that many fail to see the power of feedback.

It is my hope that sharing these new insights with you and placing them in context will give you many more powerful tools in your efforts to discover the power of feedback.

CHAPTER 1

Reacting to Feedback

The process of giving thousands of people feedback on their individual performance has uncovered several clear and defined principles of feedback that generally apply in most interactions involving feedback. We begin by discussing each of those principles.

PRINCIPLE 1

Asking others for input increases their expectation that you will change in a positive way.

Many who receive feedback turn that feedback into measurable change. However, others receiving feedback do not change. This frustrates not only those receiving the feedback, but also those providing the feedback. This leads to a second principle.

PRINCIPLE 2

If you receive feedback but do not change for the better, you will be perceived more negatively than if you had not received feedback.

You can compound your negative feedback by ignoring or rejecting it. When people receive feedback, they react. Their reactions may range from extremely negative to extremely

positive, or there may be no visible reaction at all. Regardless of the reaction, a third principle emerges.

PRINCIPLE 3

You will not change what you do not believe needs to be changed.

A personal feedback experience is fundamentally different from looking at a production report or an accounting statement. Even though someone may provide feedback in a way that leaves no room for doubt or difficulty in understanding, this does not necessarily guarantee that people will believe the feedback, or that they will act on it. Those who receive feedback and then make changes or adjustments in their behavior become better people because of the feedback. But there may be a few obstacles along the way including denial.

PRINCIPLE 4

Rather than accept criticism, we tend to denounce not only what is said, but those who say it.

As people move from childhood to adulthood, the maturation process makes us more effective as adults than we were as children. However, because children have not had years of practice in denial, most of them are much more effective at accepting feedback than adults. The extent to which you have developed your denial skills determines the extent to which you accept feedback or question its accuracy.